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Architecture for homeless: shifting paradigm in a domestic borderscape

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“Architecture is not the first thing that most people think of when they consider how best to help the homeless. But architecture can play an important role in creating facilities that sustain the dignity of people who have fallen on hard times.”¹

This paper deals with the emergency of a new perspective in providing facilities for homelessness.

I here present some results of a broader study I am still performing which focuses on architecture and is based on critical design theory, combining theoretical aspects with a field-grounded approach, referring to the experiences provided by new subjects developing innovative strategies for supportive housing.

One of the premises of this research is that the domestic sphere is not merely a spatial structure, but a symbolic and analogical one, where the construction of the self and the social group we belong to is deeply marked by associations between people and spaces.

On these premises, this work builds up a selective survey of case-studies sharing a belief in the role of architectural research as a skill to model innovative proposals to transitional housing.

Among the main sources are the reports of the organisations dealing with homelessness in Europe and northern America, as well as the reports of international institutions involved in social reintegration through housing².

I will particularly analyse the activity of *Common Ground*, a non profit organisation operating in the United States through a strongly architectural research-based practise, which today is the pre-eminent provider of solutions to street homelessness.

The visual vocabulary of current homeless facilities often reflects an uncanny, uncomfortable sense of place imbued with the lack of safety,

¹ Sam Davis, *Designing for homeless, architecture that works*, University of California Press, 2004, p.13.

² Cfr. *Un-habitat* reports, *Feantsa* reports and publications.

privacy and property, sending a message to residents – and to the community – which are supposed to embody this paradigm.

The interplay of the material and symbolic effects produced by the markers of this domestic landscape operates on social and spatial structure of our cosmopolitan cities.

Retracing *Common Ground*'s most recent initiatives, I will stress the role played by architectural research and design in rethinking stereotyped elements of precarious habitat (from emergency shelters to assisted housing through flophouses).

It is useful to recall first some important links in the relation which combines housing design with strategies to address pathways into, through and out of homelessness, starting from the end of 18th century, when they were first affirmed.

The research I have been doing over the last years focuses on the architectural dimension of temporary housing, on its own design process, and on the relation with formal and structural modality of ordering space which are inherent to the design of housing in its broadest sense³.

The production of temporary housing within the urban context started in the middle of the nineteenth century in western Europe as well as in northern America, to meet new needs and conditions of living in the modern metropolis, and since it emerged, it differed in two main streams.

The first one consists of isolated constructions, prefabs or built on site constructions (metal containers, wooden sheds), put up side by side in order to fill up large areas with extremely low density, areas which are considered non useful for building purposes, and that are not served by electricity and water supply. Those areas became enclaves with no relations with urban systems and values of their context, not able to mediate or interpret orogeographical conditions of the site.

The most representative example in this case are the sheds built to give shelter to whom lost their house through a destructive event, war or natural catastrophes. The supposition inspiring this kind of project was to provide

³ Tesoriere, Zeila, *Le logement temporaire comme laboratoire pour l'architecture. Caractères, généalogie et perspectives d'un espace domestique*. Thèse de doctorat en architecture, Université Paris 8 – Université de Palerme, II voll. 438 p., 2004.

short-term accommodations, aiming to a high change of occupancy, to be dismantled once the emergency over.

Therefore, the modality of their construction has always been that of mere built objects, lacking the fundamental procedures and techniques of architectural Knowledge, limited to secure the minimum technical quality of the building blocks.

In the same years, during the 19th and 20th century in Europe as well as in northern America, the socio-political, administrative and economical policies dealing with reconstructions found out, on the contrary, that the occupancy of these housing systems extended over a far longer period and evidenced the economical cost and the social implications of dismantling them.

During the same period, inner-city slums appeared in the new industrialised metropolis - or shanty-towns in their outskirts - , settlements (often illegal or unauthorized) built and populated generally by the lowest social classes, often rural population drawn to the city, expecting a better life through the work in factories. These areas, varying in size, were settled on unused terrains owned by the city itself, and were usurped or given without any guarantee on duration due to administrative tolerance.

At a slightly higher level, the factory workers could find housing in residential hotels or in collective shelters.

In all of these cases, the conditions of life were hygienically and socially unsustainable, threatening to be hotbeds of infections, epidemics and social unrest, leading the public and private institutions dealing with this situation look for a solution to the problem.

So, in this second case the prevalent solution consists in the invention of a new typology: big housing buildings, usually blocks of various floors with inner or open courtyard, inserted in the urban space, its rules and logics, providing housing and common facilities in order to educate its inhabitants to the new life in the metropolis.

This goes through learning elementary rules of personal and domestic hygiene, trusting on the capacity of the architectural space – and particularly the domestic one – to induce practices, modifying behaviour and

transforming the way on how the inhabitants consider and value themselves towards the neighbours around them.

This moralising attempt animated anthropologists, philanthropies, industrials and architects, who started a long and intensive testing phase through the design, production and efficacy evaluation of a large number of buildings, that formed the basics for a profound innovation in modern European housing and permit to be used as background on which this paper would rely to.

The principle difference between the two kinds of emergency housing I have recall, thus, originate from the supposed relation between the architectural type and the inhabitant.

Those who were coming from a normal living condition, lost their house through disaster, are generally due to obtain a single living unit, lacking of relations with the urban structure or the geographical context.

Those who, on the other hand, were coming from a situation that associates backward to the ignorance of social and cultural practises since the 19th century have been centred by a rather complex system in which architectural form is settle by a design process aimed to transform behaviours, and through these transformations, to change the relation between its inhabitants and the community.

So largely different from the isolated perishable single unit, the big nineteenth century buildings to temporary host workers have been designed, and then operated as a crucial device in social reinsertion through housing.

Therefore, dwelling is a cultural act constitutional for the identity of singles and groups, non a function, that produces devices able to lead people to regain inclusion in their community, just as the impossibility of living in a domestic space is a procedure of marginalisation.

That is why we can consider the design of buildings matching housing and common facilities, having a crucial function, then and now, along the pathways into and out of homelessness.

The conditions of our nowadays cities remind some aspects of the conditions we talked about above.

Numbers of political, economical factors have radically increased the number of homelessness as well as the nature and composition within this mounting segment of the population.

Not being able to live in a domestic space – more than being unemployed – is for those people the discriminative character that turns them protagonists in a landscape of marginality and exclusion that wedges in like an inlay in the ordinary one of our cities.

Facing the boundary between who lives in a house and who does not, the citizens of those two landscapes look at each other, from one side of the mirror the other.

An altogether homogeneous approach towards homelessness through housing can be found from the second world war until the late eighties.

Nonetheless the articulation and the dimension of the phenomenon grew rapidly after the second world war and acquired a new profile in the sixties, there have been no substantial alterations in its describing tools and interpretations.

We could put forward the hypothesis that, at least in western Europe, this depends on the profound modification the cultural tendencies orienting architectural discourse went through, between the late fifties and the early eighties.

In such a long period the positions of the Modern Movement was surpassed coming along with a new approach towards sociology and anthropology, since these sciences work on close fields (in particular on the domestic space and its relation with the city). Along this period, it was fully reaffirmed that the notion of dwelling was not simply a dogma of the functionalistic tetralogy, but an act of articulating affective and symbolic implications, leaving significant traces on the domestic space through its use and its practice.

As a fine example we could recall the work of historian, philosopher and theologian Michel de Certeau⁴. Being of great influence, his work on the culture of daily life uses the domestic space as one of the main field for his research. It analysed the re-appropriation of daily object and spaces made by

⁴ Cfr. De Certeau, Michel ; Giard, Luce ; Mayol, Pierre, *L'invention du quotidien*, vol.1 : *Arts de faire* ; vol.2 : *Habiter, cuisiner*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980. English translation: *The practise of everyday life* , 1984.

common people through their use, interpreted the meaning of the *detournement* often imposed on objects and codes and have given a significant identification role to *disorder*, determining profound mutations on the position of researchers working on housing design.

Starting from the eighties there has been a modification in the perception of the phenomenon of homeless. A broad interest by the media, through television and newspapers, arrange the representation of an antique trope of the urban poverty, then presented as new and emblematic, that reveals the relations between some dimensions of living in the metropolis and the social reaction regarding them.

In the media representations it is often emphasised the reversal of role leading from a formerly ordinary life to the state of homelessness. Once having owned a house, having had a job, just like us, and then having lost it, makes these people to embody the features of urban uncanny (according to S. Freud concept of *Unheimliche*, 1919), bringing them as normalised, admonishing figures, rhetorical simulacrum of the universal fragility of human condition⁵.

At the same period extended studies quested this problem in sociological, anthropological and geographical terms, coming with, especially in the USA, the foundation of numerous institutions – most of them private – fighting homelessness and contribute to a direct knowledge of the phenomenon⁶.

The European research on this theme is mostly carried out in sociology and anthropology. Very little studies have an architectural perspective, and in those few cases, methodology often relate to psychology and sociology. This can be put in relation with the reduction of economic encouraging policies for private subjects, and with the enhancement of institutions led

⁵ On the trivialisation of the concept of the homeless through media representations, see: Tesoriere, Zeila, “*Glam nomade. L’innovation dans le logement contemporain et les références aux habitas précaires*”, paper presented at the conference *Mobilité, précarité, hospitalité. Héritages et perspectives du logement en Europe*, Paris, 9. 29/30. 2005.

⁶ Among the number of researches reconstructing the mass media procedures through which we perceive homeless, we can recall: Pinchon, Pascale (dir.) *SDF, sans-abri, itinérant: oser la comparaison*, UCL, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2008; “Homelessness statistic”, in *Homeless in Europe*, FEANTSA newsletter, spring 2002.

by public stakeholders, proposing not very diversified housing set nor (with few exceptions) updated through constant research⁷.

In U.S.A., different tax incentives have enhanced the diffusion of private providers working on this theme – the religious missions as well as laic non profit organisations. That induced, starting from the eighties, an increased engagement of architects as experts in designing homeless facilities as well as a new interest for the research in architectural design in order to articulate and improve the proposed solutions.

From this point of view it is particularly interesting to analyse the activity of the *Common Ground Community*, a non-profit organisation founded by Rosanne Haggerty in 1990, as “a pioneer in the development of supportive housing and other research-based practices that end homelessness”, as it is written in the presentation on their web page⁸.

The work of Common Ground differs from the other operators in the field by two major modalities.

First, there is the referring to the research in architectural design as an instrument to improve the quality of the housing they build, and to get to an increased efficiency the relation between the programs and their recipients.

The second is to identify and house the most vulnerable: those who have been homeless the longest, have the most disabling conditions, and are least likely to access housing resources. These individuals typically spend years cycling between emergency shelters, hospitals and jails.

Both of these conditions are deeply innovative, and reveal a shift in perception and strategy: Common Ground provides facilities which could not have been done without architects.

The research, in the work of Common Ground is constantly and parallel performed respect to the conduction of the other part of the programs, through specialised teams, multi-disciplined experts, whose profile deals with sociology, anthropology and architecture, working together and establishing precise objectives.

⁷ For instance, see the French SONACOTRA, (Société Nationale de Construction pour le Travailleurs, 1956), that because of the great diversification of its missions changed in ADOMA (*ad* from the Latin suffix follow by an improbable contraction of the term *domus*).

⁸ <http://www.commonground.org>

The results of this research are the basis on which the organisation start the ground action, at its turn run by specific professionals working for Common Ground (architects, fund raising teams, general project contractors etc.)

The fieldwork, run with the same methodology the academic research is done – a series of interviews, elaborating maps and drawings from the recipients, photographic campaigns – integrates the research made on the already existing building stock.

This research, moreover, does not limit itself to the specific sub-field of homeless facilities but focuses the entire segment of urban housing buildings, showing a profound awareness towards contemporary design techniques, and specially towards the role of contamination between different architectural forms, according to a non-functionalistic approach.

An emblematic operation following this idea was the *First Step house* programme, developed between 2003 and 2007 and grafted on the first ten years of experience of Common Ground.

The principle choice is relative to the advantage, in terms of costs and social outcome deriving from building permanent housing more than shelters (structures where the users do not sleep together in a dormitory, but in building where they can have their own little space at disposition, in some cases with private bathroom and kitchen, were some activities remain collective); the other one is the decision of operate through restoration of old buildings that for many years were used as flophouses or residential hotels, starting of with the acquisitions of two buildings of the Bowery, once New York's skid-row.

Architects well know that restoring old and worn out buildings, modifying its plumbing and sanitations, and inserting new activities, is generally more expensive than starting from scratch.

Though, the main difference is that through buying old buildings and restoring them, Common Ground manages to intervene in the core of the urban tissue, so avoiding the principle obstacle in these operations which is finding affordable sites and the payment of construction rights, and making the facilities for homeless elements of re-qualification of the neighbourhood, not detracting agents of the urban setting.

The hundred-year old *Andrew House* (a partly occupied flophouse in the Bowery), followed a year later by purchasing two floors in the Prince Hotel, a lodging house located a block from Andrew, have been the sites where to reinvented solution for private, safe, clean and affordable short-term accommodations to individuals who are transitioning to houses, facing homelessness, or who have rejected or failed in other programs.

The team decided to maintaining the typology, but upgrading its characters and performances.

The existing structure would be preserved mostly as it was, inserting new cubicles inside, using the plug-in technique.

Like the earlier twentieth-century flops, the ceilings of the First Step cubicles would not be completely enclosed, in order to provide ventilation, access to natural light, and to respect building code requirements for fire sprinklers.

Flop houses are generally considered the worst and least flexible among the facilities to social insertion through housing. Their set up is, since centuries, that of big dormitories, divided by a narrow hallway that leads to tiny cubicles, until 90 per floor, and which walls do not reach the ceiling and do not receive natural light. Each floor provides only one bathroom, and there are no storage spaces neither community areas.

These two last points are considered particularly negative to who works in this field. The programs working on social reinsertion generally shared by the associations – if the people in question have resolved possible addiction to drugs or alcohol, if they do not suffer from diseases or being mentally unstable – aim at make the social ability grow, in order to find and maintain a job as well as to live in a building in which they are neighbours.

This is encouraged by architectural design providing spaces that can be shared, to perform simple activities (waiting for a cubicle to be assigned, not standing in line, but sitting in an open courtyard or in a waiting room, having their meals, or reading).

At the same time it is important to increase the extent of the individual's control of one's space. This introduces the abstract notion that physical space has a value because it represents the needs, abilities and aspirations of an individual.

People who have been homeless for long time are not likely to make this association.

Making personal transitions visually apparent is part of the process leading to independence. Common Ground team considered that the best sign to symbolize this change was to provide storages that need a key to be opened (or a private combinations of numbers, to contain the cost), seen that being homeless means not having any more opportunities to use keys (car, house, office).

In order to guarantee the higher quality and freedom of invention in renovating the flophouse type, Common Ground held what seems to be the first international open design competition ever launched in this field.

The jury, headed by academic luminaries such as Steven Holl and Toshiko Mori, received more then 180 entries.

The five chosen proposals, starting of with those that defined the project, finished in 2008, all deal with a design process based on the analogy with other types, which is proper of the inventive phase of the project, (rather than the knowledge of laws and regulations). The construction of the cubicles and the possibility to transport its components to every single floor by escalator to be assembled on the spot, made coming up analogies with steel cabins on ocean liners cruise ships⁹, whose walls are prewired, and that offer a variety of combination starting from a simple panel available as door, louvered door, with windows or integrative lighting, opaque or translucent to brig light inside the unities.

The similarity between the structures for the homeless and some military structures¹⁰ suggested to reuse pre-existing materials from the marine and aviation industry, and even to recycle entire components, including light, and colourful items.

⁹ It should be remembered that the contamination between temporary emergency housing and those built for leisure already appeared in architectural design practise, when in the middle of XX century, Jean Prouvé drawn on some of his experiences for cruise ship cabin design in the construction of transitory housing.

¹⁰ It is worth to stress that the lack of intimacy in homeless facilities and in army dormitories leas to two different purposes. In the first case, the demoralizing effect of a lack of privacy personal territory and individuality is amply attested. In the second case, spatial structure of Army barracks are intended to diminish the sense of self n order to encourage the camaraderie and collective identity.

Others suggested parallels with student housing and the mobility of the panels that enclose the cubicles, in order to let residents customize “their” space (which is, of course, difficult to apply in reality).

It has to be underlined that all of the proposals gave much attention to the interaction between the residents and the space, to the emotional reactions of the inhabitants, to the capability of the architectural forms to trigger processes of identification based on memories and on the symbolic value of space.

An exhibition featuring the 180 entries from the competition has been held during one month in the ballroom of the Prince George Hotel, in New York. Reopened in 2000 after a challenging renovation, headed by *Beyer Blinder Bell architects and planners* (well known for its historical preservation of Grand Central Station and Ellis Island), the Prince George used to be one of the most luxurious hotels in the USA of the early nineteenth century, before its decline transformed it into the biggest recovery centre for homeless in the USA (hosting up to 600 people).

The renovation of Prince George Hotel has been the first big operation in which Common Ground got involved, taking advantage of tax credits granted for renovating historic structures, which permitted to finance a significant portion of the cost, and giving R. Haggerty certainty of giving to the community an antique building, restored and transformed in a social service that was secure, protected and clean, was the best strategy to perform a social insertion program through housing.

Responding to the heavy critics from the community, Common Ground started off with a series of new activities, still on today, to show the public the results of the project; through expositions and conferences open to the city, and to demonstrate its commitment to the project, the association moved its administrative offices onto the top floor of the Prince George.

Using the antique ballroom, once again shining after the restoring, for exhibitions and conferences in which are showed the drawings of the project and the photographs of its lodgers, has become a custom of the association, wanting to reinforce the pride and membership of the recipients. It made it easier to meet with the citizens, giving them a reason to come to a place where they would never have gone to otherwise.

Common Ground is not the only organisation having introduced the research in architectural design as determinant element of efficacy of its programs.

It was although the first in the USA and today it is leader in this field and through their work new representative treat have shown up.

Successful design for the homeless can be achieved when the client and the architect strive to exceed the basic need of rudimentary shelter, this is easier to reach nowadays, since the orientation of the disciplinary community working in this field has left behind the themes of functionalism, and retains that the design of a house – whatever kind of house – is the design of catalysing social processes.