Places to Rethink: Urban Identity and Vernacular Architecture. A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The landscape, natural and built in Italy today, is very different from idealization of the eighteenth-century travelers, who saw in 'beautiful country' a happy balance between nature and architecture. In some areas of the country, especially in the more industrialized and anthropized North, the identity of the place, threatened by forms (architectural, urban and infrastructural ...) conflicting, it is difficult to recognize, especially in the community who, unable to give the appropriate value to the proposed architecture, takes refuge in a formal decontextualized repertoire.

The paper aims to analyze the urban evolution of Alessandria, a small town in northern Italy: a comparison between the historical centre and residential neighborhoods grown since the war, emerges as the building has lost its character of vernacular architecture, it will be unable to combine the contemporary with the place and its history. The contribution, without any presumption unlikely to formulate solutions to the question, would like to offer, with the classification of the building, an opportunity of reading the built landscape in which architecture, in the academic sense, if not almost track or not decisive to reverse the decline of the identity of the place.

KEYWORDS: Identity, Vernacular architecture, Alessandria: urban development

1   INTRODUCTION

The relationship between housing and urban planning is certainly not a new theme in the architectural debate, but no means is less his interest for this.

The growth of the city after Second World War, the functional separation dictated by urbanism technique and, finally, the spectacle of historical centers in tourism and tertiary keys, deprived the 'city' of a social and cultural dimension of the identity. The issue forces us to confront an ever-increasing complexity of theoretical and practical problems, which refer to political-legislative, financial and, above all, cultural matters; the fragmentation of the contemporary city and its geographical distribution manifest conflict of these problems and the absence, in the present, of an effective urban policy of the government, not only technical and quantitative, able to maintain and reconfigure the cultural landscape.

These are problems that in the urban centers of lower dimension emerge most clearly due to the absence of trendy urban projects and an in-depth debate on the identity of the place, suitable to target economic and cultural resources to the redefinition of the meaning of public space, dispersed, by a private vernacular housing, alien both to the theory and the history of the architecture of the place.

2 THE CITY AND URBAN PLANNING: THE CONTEXT PROBLEMATIC

The fragmented contemporary city is the result of multiple factors (ideological, technical, economic,...) that have contribute, in the twentieth century, to define new living spaces, individual and collective, antithetical to the historic city. It was just a little less than a century, with the complicity at the destruction of the war and the success of the industrial society, the transformation of Western cities affected by metamorphosis is not comparable to those of the past, both material and cultural terms, which reveal the contradictions and unresolved issues of urban thinking of the twentieth century.

With the suburbs and the 'urban sprawl', the present inherits an uncertain urban conception, that never in history has set less than during the twentieth century: a thought that brings together conflicting positions, which derives from diversified urban assumptions, often unsuccessful or inconclusive, who have supported the emerge of the concept of a city liberated from the planning, the conviction of a *freedom* to build similar to the other individual liberties.

The urban thought of the present is subject, first, to the theme of the *breaking*, which was introduced by the avant-garde in the early decades of the twentieth century and effectively synthesized from the tables of Le Corbusier of comparison between the *ville radieuse* and the historical urban fabric (Figure 1). Breaking as a search for an alternative city, new and freed from the traditional urban design, derived, in part, as an antithesis to love without limits of the historic city experienced by late-nineteenth-century theorists (Ruskin, Violet-le-Duc); a desire to breaking implies the hate and repulsion of the traditional forms of composition, of the stylistic order, of the uniformity and conformism bourgeois. The critique of the social model and the emergence of political ideologies equally radical leads to an *alternative urban* idea, that as condemning his conservative 'rule', leads to the emergence of the City planning, that is another regulatory system, as radical in its quantitative technique for open-ended in terms of choices of form. The idea of breaking relies, therefore, a city without agglomeration, declined from the next planning in functional specialization and, in the present, in the fragmentation of urban elements.
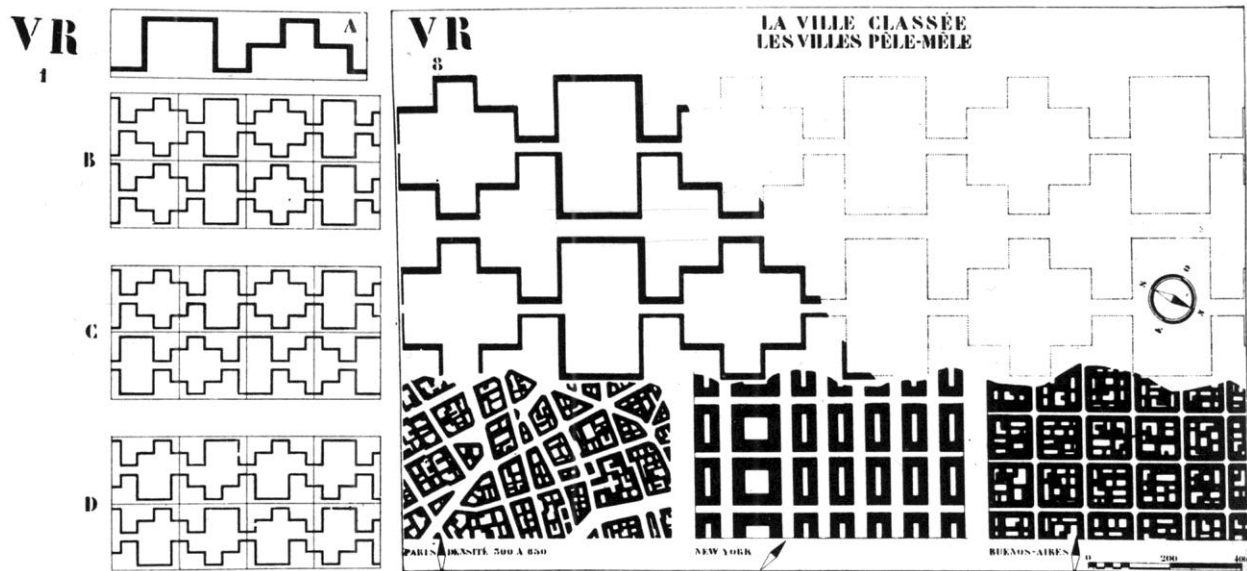

Figure 1: Le Corbusier table of Ville radieuse (1929-30) and comparison between the historic city and redens. Reprinted from Docci, 1988

Since the theme of the breaking and alternative city, it follows that the *nomadism* of the city: the programmatic renunciation of modification of the historic city, interrupting the traditional evolutionary process, has imposed the need to explore outside of the 'city' new spaces, materials and ideological, in which erect the proclamation of the modern urban architecture.

In Italy, although exempt from the European *new towns*, has interpreted this paradigm by the building of 'modern' appendages on the edge of the consolidated city, highly distinct from those on both the formal and social level. Construction projects, rather than large-scale urban planning, that without a substantial affect on the concept of living, on the contrary have started the process of degeneration and waste from the 'modern' city.

Finally, if we consider the Italian regulatory framework of the second half of the twentieth century, refined but ignored, and the marginal role of public intervention in the housing sector, one can understand the contradictory and degraded situation of the landscape, in which the planning was limited to identify building areas enabling a transformation of the urban landscape exclusively driven by special interests in which issues of architecture are totally unrelated.

The sprawl of the contemporary city, its expansion has removed the limit urban and the recognizability of the spaces (contrary to what is desired by the functional zoning), is the salient feature of the modern landscape. Distribution without agglomeration: the urban landscape made up of discrete elements, contrasting on the formal and, often, functional level, that they gave up a summary, however unlikely, leaving on the field open complex issues, first of all, the need for reconfiguration of the spaces, not due nor to modern architecture or to the history of the place. However, "it is doubtful that today geographical art could be part of the dream of developed societies. Far from requiring that architects recompose the world of objects that have helped to create, they could very well leave them the illusion of possessing even the grips on a discontinuous of operations completely isolated (model prison yesterday, the supermarket today) entrusting the architects the care to dress a collection in which the vacuum, the spacing or gaps would, once and for all, not be thought" (Fortier, 1993).

3   A CASE STUDY: ALESSANDRIA AND ITS PLANNING

Morphological, dimensional and, above all, economic factors have given various context forms to urban theory, in which the disciplinary problematic issues, of the architecture and the urban design, engage other localist factors, altering the 'ideological' architecture positions, showing however an approval character of cancellation of the historic landscape.

In marginal contexts, the modernity has introduced, as far as possible, elements of major discontinuity in the built landscape with respect to the 'central' sites, giving them a character of suburbs, of generalized sprawl, deteriorating both of land uses and the architectural quality. A place where even the term 'suburb' appears to be adequate to the description, since it's a repertoire of incoherent elements: neither city nor country, only a place of consumption of space.

3.1   Alessandria: historical framework

The military is the aspect that best summarizes the urban history of the city, situated on the edge of the Po valley, in the proximity of the boundaries of the ancient pre-unitary states, the city has, for centuries, first under the rule of the Spanish Duchy of Milan and then under the House of Savoy, occupied a role as military, in control of the plains and the trade routes between it and the sea. Role that has imposed severe restrictions on the urban fabric and mutilation, especially with the construction (1728) of the Citadel, one of the largest in Europe, which resulted in the killing of an entire neighborhood, but at the same time it ensured a development and a raison for being. Military importance was confirmed first by Napoleon (which foreshadowed her transformation in the *grande ville de Marengo*) and then by the new Italian State, which allowed the demolition of the walls long after other Italian cities. In Alessandria, still in the 1860s, when other cities for decades had been freed from the enclosure walls, are still built military works (three forts crown the fortified walls) and reinforced the walls: "in the new unitary state Alessandria (...) covers the function of logistical and military core ties for many years will be evolving on the land for the strategic planning of the city." (Dameri, 2010)

The reconfiguration of the role with the birth of the national State required the city to search for a new identity, which, however, has emerged with difficulty: an industrial development latent, open spaces and 'military' buildings have decommissioned converted the "bulwark of Italy" in the marginal city.
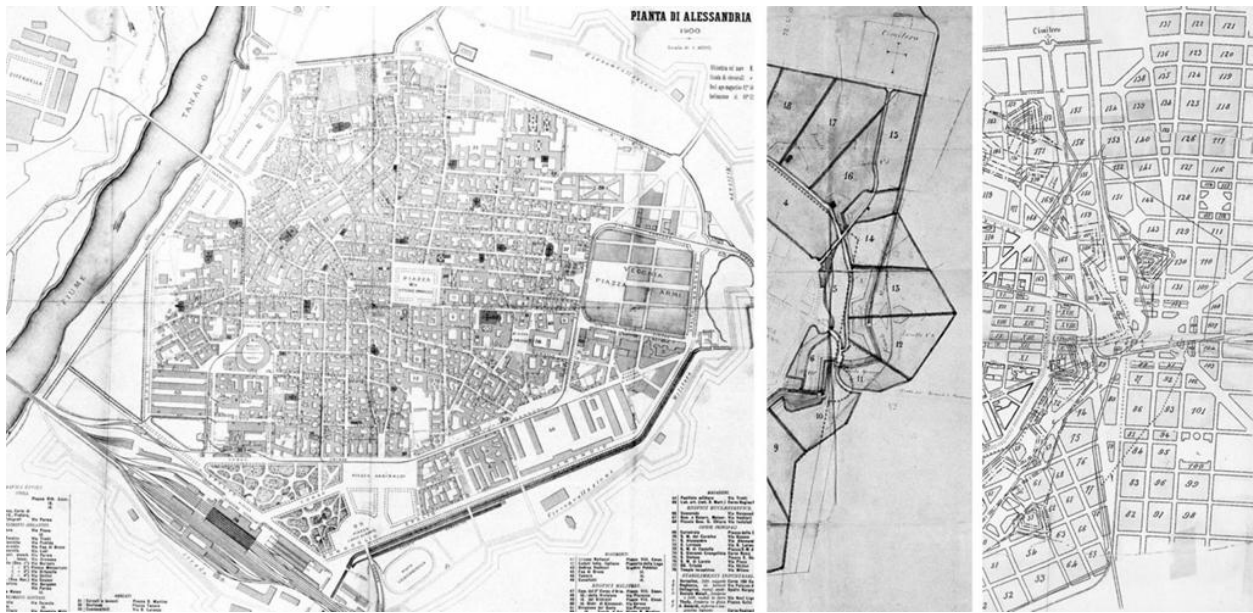
Figure 2: Urban cartography of Alessandria: plan of the walled city, in 1900 (on the right), excerpt from the plan of disused fortifications, circa 1890 (on the middle), excerpt of the expansion plan, in 1909 (on the left). Reprinted from Comoli, 2000

The urban site plan, which recognize the traces of the original medieval cores, allows the identification of the ancient ring wall, turned into a *circular road* about six miles, and the evolution to the suburbs, that have occurred during the twentieth century. In these subdivisions, both for road design and, especially, for formal and compositional characters of the buildings, you can rebuild, by fragments, the history of modern architecture. (Figure 2). And with it, his of local interpretation, the vernacular reading of the theoretical concepts, which (with the exception of a few cases and no later) led the transformation of the city, until the current breakdown of the buildings. The limit of the city, long defended militarily, it was so removed, initiating the consumerism development, of which the present has not yet been able to understand or solve.

3.2 Urban growth: formal repertoire of visions of the city

If the historical city, that bounded the ancient city walls, has, in spite of the demolition and the radical transformations, a unified fabric, mainly seven-nineteenth century, the development *extramuros* is, on the contrary, characterized by different languages, which refer to different periods and to the various social conceptions that the architecture itself is bound to employ: architecture as healing, as a defender of traditional building type, as a tool for social equalization, ... Anyway, an architecture unable to configure the identity of a place, if not in negative terms, that, in the present, has embarked on the path of an eclectic vernacular shamelessly in opposition to the architecture of the 'architects', rejected by the dominant taste, although the built landscape do not lack of examples of relief.

Alessandria, in the history of modern architecture, is remembered for some buildings of Ignazio Gardella, that reinterpret, it in a new way, the regionalist character of the place: in the Anti-Tuberculosis Dispensary (1936-38, figure 3 and 4) and in the adjacent buildings is proposed, in an original way, the composition plan and the use of brick, recurring characters (the court system and the curtain grilled) of rural houses, and, especially, in the Houses Borsalino (1950-52, figure 5) an image of residential building is summarized, modern in its simplicity, and not cheap, which is still current.
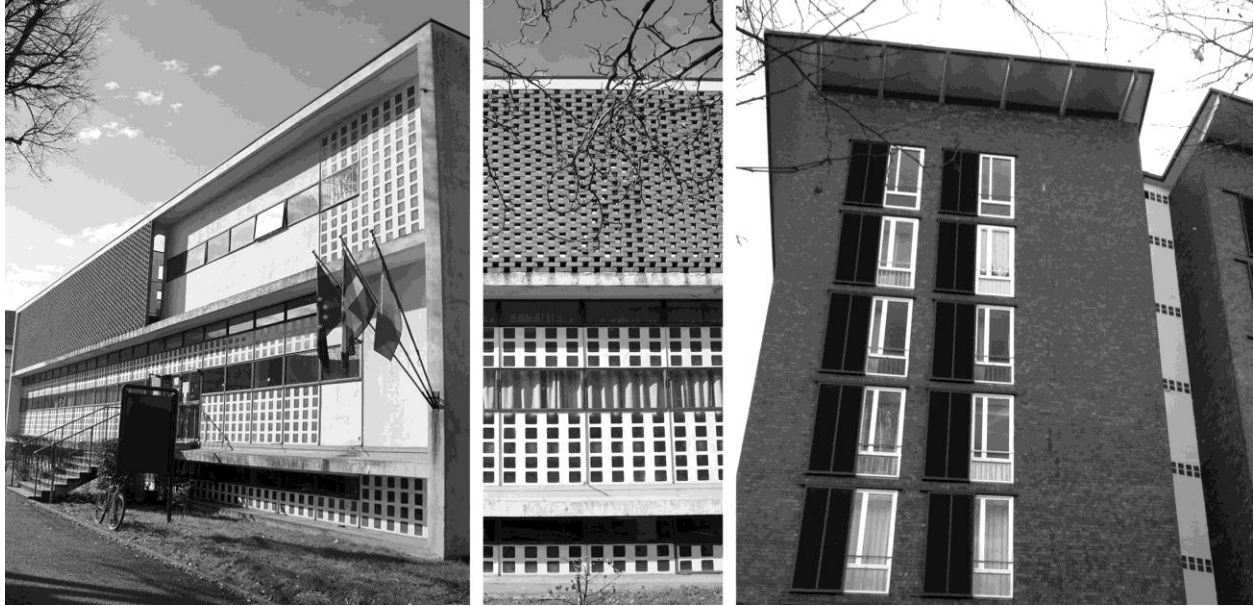
Figure 3, 4, 5: Ignazio Gardella in Alessandria: the Anti-Tuberculosis Dispensary, 1936-38, overall view (on the left) and detail of the facade grid (in the middle), the Borsalino Houses, 1950-52, detail of facade (on the right). Photo by author

The residential building, in spite of these examples, and many buildings, less known but equally interesting, followed in the same years a very different path of development, for economic reasons-speculative and especially for cultural rights, which led to the disintegration of the tissue and the anonymous replication of models 'no place'.

A city *multiplied* by repertoires of assumptions that distinguish the space in places ideological and formal, which can classify the architecture and its contradictions.

Forms of multiplication:
The city of *early modernity*. It corresponds to the one determined by national unification and the process of uniformity, formal and normative, imposed by the new state, which finds representation in the medieval historicism, especially Romanesque, and in the grandiloquent eclecticism, in which the nascent Italian identity is declined. In the city neighborhoods emerge in the spaces freed from the fortifications, with the regular plant, which emerges in both the search for a continuity with the past traces of the previous routes, focused on access gates. It is the middle-class city, whose eclecticism, testifies the start of the fragmentation and the affirmation of individuality, which, in the present, appear to be less confrontational than in the periphery recently, but with difficulty, however, define a place identified. Since the 'city' that counts, on a formal level (synthesized from the large arcaded square, 1888, figure 6, on the left), it is only the expression of a social class, in parallel large slums are built, where traditional types are replicated, and sometimes in line with the court system, without any ambition in terms of the urban landscape (Figure 8, on the right).

The twenty years of the fascist regime in the urban fabric determines the introduction of conflicting elements, confirming also the scale of the small urban center with respect to the uncertainty of fascism architectural positions. Regime that has swung between the support of rationalism, especially to introduce the 'modernity' in the smaller towns, and the classical historicist for the representation of power. In Alessandria fascism promoted public buildings unpublished (cited the dispensary Gardella, the new Satatorio always of Gardella, the railway station, ...), authentic rationalist experiments, and, on the contrary, residential buildings heavily indebted to the tradition. On the level of the residence is configured a city as protector of traditional building typologies: courtyard buildings that aspire to attract the nation's

agricultural origin (Figure 7, on the middle), organized by blocks with large accesses to the memory of those farm rural areas.

Figure 6, 7, 8: Forms of buildings: the eclectic Piazza Garibaldi, 1888 (on the left), the 'workers houses', detail of the entrance of the complex, in 1938 (on the middle), public housing, circa 1950 (on the left).
Photo by author

The rational city. Paradigm after World War Second that was expressed with the mono-functional city and the city of equalization. The need often assumed and not verified, to meet the economic boom of the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century found expression in zoning planning technique, which has produced similar large districts on the outskirts of any Western city: high -density housing opposed to public spaces (streets, places for trade, car , ...) oversized and unused, the lack of cultural characterization of the places (building models replicated with minor variations) that causes disorientation even within a small block, the action to 'traditional' plants (buildings sometimes arranged in line, sometimes arranged in courtyard) are readable on the plans, but not noticeable, because of the variations of the dimensional relations, in reality. It takes these few observations to delineate a city that, in contrast to of aspiration the equalization, has produced a city of segregation, supporting the combination, in common thought, of the planning town with the social and formal segregation. The planning and architecture that has materialized thus have gradually taken on a negative connotation, from which urban projects and individual building were dismissing, pushing the current development to the eclecticism, formal and vernacular, on which the architecture is unable to impose a control, or at least provide an address.

The realization, at the end of the twentieth century ,some significant urban projects, new Houses Borsalino (by P. Portoghesi, 1988, fig. 10) and the so-called 'New Town' (by L. Krier, 1995-2000,Figure 9), introduced in the building landscape elements of discontinuity further, proposing the cyclical return of the opposition between historicism of academic architecture and modern technology, evoked by contemporary interventions of building at low energy (photovoltaic village, built in 1997-2004 with Community funds, Figure 11).

From these premises, the multiplication of 'cities' within the city, that is of formal and ideological places opposing and current in the urban fabric, is legitimizing the *vernacular city*, that represent, in terms of occupied land and economic resources, the share predominant of the recent built. In spite of the architectural theories and examples from magazines or identified in the academic debate as a sign of modernity, the authentic development of the city is accomplished by actions 'without architecture', which legitimized by the inconsistency of the architecture itself, the failure of the planning and the permissiveness of the building regulations, provide the true essence of the city: the city without agglomeration, representation of individuality and freedom even architectural of each. A city in which each element is elevated, deceptively, to synthesis of the collective *urbs*, providing an image of the

disintegration and the inability to give up their artistic vanity rather than preserving the collective identity. A city unable to define meaningful urban places, which replaced the uniformity/density of the popular districts of the 70s (large blocks of buildings in urban areas not characterized as) the variety/rarefaction of recent construction: residential single/multi-family, subdivisions in the limits of legality, which evoke images (historical, folkloric, technological, ...) different and gratuitous, sucking, deliberately to emerge as a manifesto of individuality. The vernacular city is such an architectural agglomeration of individual 'passions', expressed through materials (coatings of hewn stone, metal), with the simple colour of the painting (the palette is very wide, as in the areas of expansion is not applied the colour planning, leaving total creative freedom), the use of decorative elements detached from time/history (pre-fabricated balustrades, statues, ...), each of which refers to images of different living (no more than the city): the 'castle', the house of the prairie, the Mediterranean house, a mountain cabin ... (Figure 12). In fact nothing new to what has already been blamed by Loos regarding the recognition of the architect's home in the countryside, with the difference that, today, rises each such having forgotten that cultural tradition, which guaranteed to place your identity and recognition (Loos, 1972). The urban fabric, torn into fragments without 'place', is emerging as an enormous repertoire of forms and quotations, briefly and casually put together, which gives the place the size of ruin, not in the romantic sense of Piranesi, but in the cultural ruins, which seeks the eternal present (Augé, 2004). A city built by the replication of models, whose poverty is justified in the absence of effective planning and a collective 'taste' indifferent to the historic landscape and the idea of the city. As absurd as to constitute places to redefine not only the actual empty neighborhoods of affordable housing and popular, but also the cultural 'empty' transmitted from residential, most recent and richer materially, although extremely poor at the ideological level. An emptiness that calls into question the sense of architecture and the survival of the idea of the city.

What solution? Meditating, perhaps, on a brilliant thought of Perec: "What is beautiful and what is ugly in a city? (...) We should, or give up talk of the town, or bring himself to talk about it as simply as possible, to talk about it in an obvious way, familiar. Dispel any preconceived ideas. Stop thinking in terms of ready-made, forget what has been said by planners and sociologists. There is something frightening in the very idea of the city, you get the impression that you can not find a foothold in images if not tragic or desperate: (...) and that we can not help but accumulate relentlessly questions without response. We can never explain or justify the city"(Perec, 1989)

Figure 9, 10, 11: The city of the 'architects': the historicist 'New Town', in L. Krier, 1995 (on the left), the neo-baroque of new Houses Borsalino, P. Portoghesi 1988 (on the middle), and the technology aesthetics of the village photovoltaic, 1997 (on the right). Photo by author

4   CONCLUSION

The *vernacular* seems to be the only sustainable dimension of contemporary architecture, especially in the little town: the brief study on the evolution of Alessandria, starting from the modern era, however fragmentary and necessarily concise, shows the difficulty of urban planning and of the architecture to guide the construction of the city in an organic way. Sentenced to fragmentation, the city shows the elevation of his theories in the current building, which not even the designers seem interested in giving a horizon of durability to their buildings. The urban development of Alessandria, especially the recent one, in fact confirms the marginal architecture has been unable to outline an idea of modernity understandable to the community, unprepared to accommodate architectural ideologies alien to the poverty of context. The possibilities afforded by a quantitative planning and indifferent to the composition of the landscape, to materialize every architectural 'whim', has misconstrued the function of urban design and, ultimately, of architecture. Obviously the problematic aspects recognized aren't a prerogative of Alessandria: in fact, the case study is set up as an excuse to reflect on the 'city', aimed, however, to show how the failure of modern urbanism and the risk of a non return to the de-structuring of the urban landscape are more, and more problematic, in small towns, where the eclectic building now seems to have taken over a direction of a vernacular folklore, perhaps, without a future.

Figure 12: The city 'common': the evolution of social housing, circa 1960 (on the left), circa 1990 (on the middle), and characters of the recent residence, circa 2010 (on the right). Photo by author

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