Chapter

Regenerate Corviale

Giovanni Caudo

Abstract

The Corviale is one of Rome's most problematic neighbourhoods. This neighbourhood's project to transform buildings is currently underway, sponsored by the Lazio Region. The 'Quarto Piano' was intended for services, community spaces and professional studios but has been converted into illegal apartments. The census had counted 135 households, but the project realised 103 apartments, a number lower than the number of households. The article reconstructs the activities carried out by the Roma Tre University research working group to complete the transformation of the building and focuses on the social support activities carried out with the residents. Numerous impacts, including intangible ones, come into play and characterise housing policy today; at least, this is the thesis we want to support in this article. The article focuses precisely on these impacts by highlighting that today's housing issue represents a spectrum of situations far beyond the housing. The issue of housing, considered in the light of this case study, where we can not only look at the tradition but also the innovation of housing policy, and described in the final chapter, highlights some lines of action that can have a general value that goes far beyond the case reproduced here.

Keywords: housing, public housing, urban regeneration, heritage, adaptive reuse

1. Introduction

Corviale is Rome's most famous public housing district and enjoys an international reputation. Its size has always caught the interest of architects and the imagination of citizens. Its main features are length, almost a kilometre, and the concentration of all accommodations in a single building. For these reasons, it has already received much attention from researchers in the field of housing studies. Since 2019, a vital regeneration intervention has been underway for the 'Quarto Piano' of the building. Over time, a hundred families have settled illegally, converting the spaces intended for public services, shops and offices into self-built flats. Years after the start of this self-build process, the Lazio region has financed an intervention programme to stabilise the change of use. The self-built houses are being replaced by new houses designed from scratch. It is an intervention that is only partly constructional. Numerous impacts, including intangible ones, come into play and characterise housing policy today; at least, this is the thesis we want to support in this article. The article's structure describes public housing in Rome and how the Corviale neighbourhood fits into this long, not always linear history. It then recounts the history of the Corviale

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neighbourhood, essentially its evolution over time and the processes of adaptation carried out by the residents, often as a rejection of the original project. It then describes the 'Quarto Piano' redevelopment project and its final conversion into flats, highlighting not only the structural aspects but also the social impact it has had. The chapter focuses precisely on these impacts by highlighting that today's housing issue represents a spectrum of situations far beyond the housing issue. From this point of view, the case study reproduced here presents the 'Laboratorio di Città Corviale' role in accompanying the redevelopment project. The laboratory, promoted by the University of Roma Tre, Department of Architecture, and supported by the Lazio Region, has played a role that should be known because of the results it has achieved in monitoring the implementation of the measures. The issue of housing, considered in the light of this case study, where we can not only look at the tradition but also the innovation of housing policy, and described in the final chapter, highlights some lines of action that can have a general value that goes far beyond the case reproduced here.

2. The public housing in Rome

From 1969 to 1989, the largest public housing project was carried out in Rome: 4456 ha of surface and about 700,000 rooms in 70 neighbourhoods; at the end of the program, in 1989, just over 500,000 had been built in 114 neighbourhoods [1]. Despite the shrinkage suffered, it remains the most extensive public housing project ever undertaken in Italy, twice as much as in Milan. The Plan for Economic and Social Housing in Rome (Peep) was prepared in 1964 and completed the first implementation phase in 1985 when the second Plan for Economic and Social Housing was approved, completing the implementation phase in 2006. The public sector intervention in social housing came in the wake of protests by the major industrial unions in 1969, which waged a critical struggle for the right to housing and against high rents. The general strike of 14 November 1969 remains one of Italy's most critical moments of social conflict in the entire post-war period. In this period of social struggle and conflict, marked by clashes in the streets with wounded and dead—a 'carabiniere' was killed during the general strike in Milan—negotiations began between the central government and the trade unions, leading two years later, in August, to Law 865/1971, the first (and still the only) organic law on housing in Italy. The law set in motion some legislative measures that it had already been prepared in the years before but had not yet been implemented due to lack of funds. Law 167 of 1962, for instance, was reissued and allowed municipalities to acquire land to construct neighbourhoods for economic and social housing [2]. The twenty-year golden age of public housing in Italy (1969–1989) significantly impacted the post-war design of the city of Rome. Much social housing and public facilities (schools, parks and gardens, car parks and churches, gymnasiums and health centres) were built in the 114 neighbourhoods. About 30% of all public facilities in the city of Rome are in these districts, which are home to only 12% of the capital's population. On average, there are about 43 square metres of public facilities per inhabitant, with a legal limit of 18 square metres. The neighbourhoods designed in the early 1970s were still committed to the models of the modern movement. They were designed as satellite towns to accommodate housing, services and public areas. They are housing estates ranging from a few hundred (500) to cities of 35,000. Initially, all areas were identified as urbanised ex-Novo, with most interventions taking place in the eastern part of Rome. The construction of the new neighbourhoods led to the urbanisation of large areas of land acquired through

expropriation from public property and subsequently converted for housing, services and infrastructure. In the second quarter, on the other hand, more emphasis was placed on the restoration and reuse of the existing heritage. The new buildings were constructed in areas adjacent to buildings already built but lacking public services and facilities. These are Rome's self-built villages in response to the lack of public housing after the intense urbanisation that gripped Rome after the war. They are entire neighbourhoods for about 900 thousand inhabitants without basic infrastructure (sewage, water supply and public facilities). The villages were built outside the provisions of the master plan and are therefore considered illegal.

3. Corviale, a machine for living and adapting over time

The Corviale district is one of the most famous and well-known symbols in the production of public cities in Rome and beyond. It is part of the first Peep and is designed for about 6800 inhabitants, with public facilities of 50 square metres per inhabitant, far above the legal minimum of 18 square metres. Of the 60 hectares of land, 36% is used for services and only 7% for buildings. This is the most striking feature of the Corviale, a single urban building almost a kilometre long and nine stores high, with a street of shops and public services, professional studios and community spaces running through its interior. It acts as a barrier at the edge of the built-up city and faces west, towards the sea and the Roman landscape, the Valle dei Casali. This creates a scenario in which nature, agricultural and urban activities merge, forming an entirely modern landscape with the Roman countryside. A neighbourhood characterised by an extreme duality between density and rarefied has come to be seen as a radical architectural exercise (**Figure 1**). The kilometre-long residential building is counterpointed by a smaller building arranged at a 45° angle to the main building and crossed by an internal street that serves the shops and ends in the facilities connecting the different buildings and the different functions, the school, the market, the multipurpose areas and the sports facilities. Looking at the concept of a residential machine, it is undoubtedly the Roman quarter that comes closer to this theory than the others. However, the solution chosen by the planners, led by Mario Fiorentino, aims to refer to the characteristics of the site and reinforce the landscape dimension of the urban. The definition of the boundary, a double boundary, that of the building, closed in on itself, and that of the city, the last bulwark built to the west in front of the landscape, form the most important architectural feature of the neighbourhood (**Figure 2**). The dimensions of the building remain one of the most important urban signs of the city of Rome. The dimensions of the building are even more pronounced as they cause the features of the landscape. Here, the echo of a duality between the building and the emptiness of the landscape reinforces the dimensions of the one urban system—the building. Given the vastness of the emptiness of the landscape and the horizon, the house-city aqueduct stands out as a symbol of redemption for the working class who are the least of these—a popular house with a unique aesthetic.

Throughout its life, the building has undergone a series of signs and adjustments that represent a continuous deviation from the planners' intentions; in some cases, the residents reject the sophisticated architectural solutions. The management of a building of this complexity was not in the hands of the regional authority that manages public housing in Rome and Lazio (Ater), and the housing machine immediately yielded to the adjustments and changes that created space between the rooms abandoned to neglect, especially the non-residential rooms used temporarily for residential



Figure 1. Corviale. Credit: Julian Schubert.

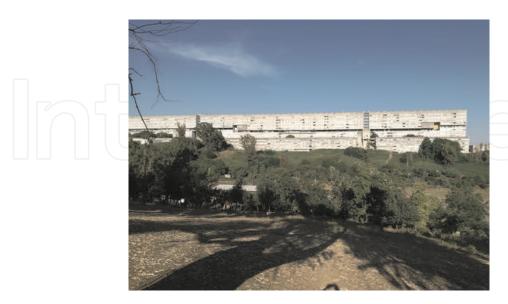


Figure 2. *Corviale. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.*

purposes. The failure to open public facilities was the leading cause of the conversion of the fourth floor into temporary accommodation. This phenomenon can also be observed in other public housing neighbourhoods in Rome, for example, in Lurentino

38, where the 'bridge' buildings that were supposed to provide the neighbourhood with shops and offices were converted into makeshift shelters and then permanently occupied by families seeking housing. In Tor Sapienza, another public housing neighbourhood in eastern Rome, the 'service spine' at the centre of the residential courtyard has suffered the same fate: first decay and then 'abusive' conversion to residential use, and there, as in Corviale, a church is also one of the illegal uses. The particular architectural structure of Corviale, a single building almost a kilometre long, is cited as the main reason for the dysfunctionality of the neighbourhood and the degradation processes that have affected it. However, a comparison with the other neighbourhoods shows that the reasons also include the inadequacy of the public housing manager, the Ater (territorial housing agency). Ater had shown sensitivity and willingness to innovate in the planning and construction of neighbourhoods in the late 1970s, and then showed the inadequacies in the management of the housing, which were even more severe in the management of the non-residential spaces, in the phase of taking over the completed neighbourhoods and their management. These spaces, which are often an essential part of the spaces and buildings in the neighbourhoods, remained unused for many years immediately after construction. The newly completed buildings were looted; in some cases, doors, windows and bathroom facilities were removed. Looting that in many cases encouraged the process of squatting by individuals or groups of citizens who converted the spaces intended for non-residential purposes into makeshift shelters. In Corviale, the fourth floor of the building, the so-called 'piano libero', which was intended to accommodate all urban services, from shops to professional studios to community spaces and condominiums, suffered this fate before falling into disrepair and being abandoned and then occupied by those demanding housing and, consequently, adaptation to the housing. The shelters, built by the families themselves, re-used the spaces that were intended for non-residential purposes (**Figure 3**). The shelters, which became the destination of various housing routes, were connected by illegal routes. In other words, the houses did not follow the usual institutional procedure of public allocation. It was an actual illegal occupation. There was space, albeit not for residential purposes, and that was enough for individual residents and families to convert it for residential purposes to meet the need for social housing. The first inhabitants of the temporary shelters were



Figure 3. 'Quarto Piano'. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

mainly Italian families, part of the migration that brought many people to the capital from the poorer areas of the south and the north of the country. In recent years, since the late nineties, the same makeshift shelters have been 'sold' to immigrant families from abroad, from the countries of Eastern Europe and North Africa.

The fourth floor, originally intended for services, was converted into living quarters, and thus resembled the other floors. The urban street inside the building thus lost all meaning as a place to meet and congregate. Over time, a process of adaptation has developed that is the result of the initiative of the individual residents and highlights their creativity in transforming the building.

The social project of coexistence, carefully thought out by the planners and taking shape in some spatial decisions, has thus been profoundly affected by a triple action—first abandonment, then appropriation and finally renewal.

3.1 'The important thing is that you can see the sunset from my house'

The regeneration programme currently being implemented refers to the measures foreseen in the 'Contratto di Quartiere II' [3], which in the first phase foresees the demolition of about 130 self-built flats to be illegally converted into 'Quarto Piano' premises intended initially for services and shops [4]. In the second phase, the programme foresees the construction of 103 new social housing units for people entitled to social housing. The implementation of the measures envisaged in the regeneration project will be accompanied by the activities of the 'Laboratorio Città di Corviale', which was established in 2018 following an agreement between the Lazio Region's Directorate for Social Inclusion and the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Rome Three. The agreement implemented a city laboratories research project, activated with funding from the department, which envisaged bringing the university into the public residential areas of the city of Rome. The summer of 2018 saw the opening of the space, Ater has made available to the university for the laboratory's activities (Figure 4). The space is in the area of craft and market activities. Four years have passed since the first opening, and every Tuesday and Thursday, as well as many other days of the week, two researchers pull up the shutter of this space with the sign: 'Laboratorio di Città Corviale' (Figure 5). The activities of the



Figure 4.The headquarters of 'Laboratorio di Città Corviale'. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

¹ Cfr. www.laboratoriocorviale.it; anche Francesco Erbani, *Dove ricomincia la città*, Manni, 2021, Lecce pp.80-101.



Figure 5.Sofia and Sara, the researchers. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

laboratory concern social support actions related to the urban regeneration project of the neighbourhood promoted by the Lazio Region and Ater and the urban renewal action of the 'piano libero', the so-called 'Quarto Piano'. This is the project 'Il Chilometro Verde' [5], which consists of social housing construction where services were offered instead.

The designer Mario Fiorentino intended the 'Quarto Piano' for services, collective spaces, professional studios and urbanity. Those who lived on the upper or lower floors (the fourth floor also coincides with the change of building type from terraced house to the bannister's house) had to find themselves in a building in the city. The history of Corviale's 'Quarto piano' was different. Immediately after its construction and more and more over time, this space was adapted to the needs of a diverse population with different housing conditions, sometimes even with distant origins. These additional living spaces became inhabited and somehow became houses. The census had counted 135 households, but the regeneration project came up with 103 instead, a number lower than that of settled households but higher than those eligible for social housing. Families who had applied to the municipality of Rome's 'Bando Speciale' and met the requirements for social housing allocation are eligible for a new flat (73 applications of which 47 were accepted and 26 were not). The social support activity implemented by the 'Laboratorio di Città Corviale' aims to promote the 'Quarto Piano' regeneration project. This activity foresees the involvement of the current occupants of the illegal houses in the rehabilitation process. There are three moments in which the project will be carried out: the temporary departure of the occupants, for the time necessary to renovate the building, and then, only for those who have the requisites, the return to the new home. For those who do not have the right to return, the accommodation outside the neighbourhood remains and the temporary accommodation in one available Ater flats.

4. The 'Laboratorio di Città Corviale'

The 'Laboratorio di Città Corviale' qualified as an indispensable agency for implementing urban renewal. About half of the planned houses were built, and 70

families moved. The main steps were three: a thorough and direct knowledge of the inhabitants of the houses, with the identification of community leaders; people-topeople dialogue to explain the project, the timetable and the modalities of moving to other homes to allow demolition and reconstruction; and finally, the extension of intervention actions that affect the life of the neighbourhood and involve other protagonists who go beyond the issue of the house and imagine a future space that creates a heritage and roots. Work began in January 2019, and the site has continued in construction phases, according to the sequence described above. Occupants are being relocated, and spaces are being cleared for the planned demolition of the project's precarious artefacts and shelters (Figures 6–8). Ten phases are planned for the full implementation of the project, three of which have already been completed (**Figures 9** and **10**). Fifty-five families were affected, of which twenty-six had the right to be resettled as they were included in the ranking list. Twenty-five families who were not included in the ranking list have no right to return to the renovated shelters and remain in the emergency shelters provided by the Ater. In addition, four families were expelled because they did not meet the requirements for social housing. The lab's activities are diverse and cover a wide range, not limited to assisting the families who must be removed to carry out the work. There are coordination activities for the move, contacts with the new residents and support for tenants in their relationship with Ater technicians and officials, and also, meet with the affected families to get bureaucratic support for the move.



Figure 6.The regeneration, work in progress. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.



Figure 7.The regeneration, work in progress. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.



Figure 8. *Plan with illegal housing, before demolition. Credit: Ater.*

Assist the families in finding the best possible placement for their children in the schools, and inform them about the phase of reintegration into the new flat, including the determination of the rent they will have to pay from the moment the new flat is handed over to them (**Figures 11–13**). In the meantime, in collaboration with local associations, the laboratory won a three-year tender for the 'Estate Romana'. It organises cultural initiatives in the neighbourhood and involves a community of artists

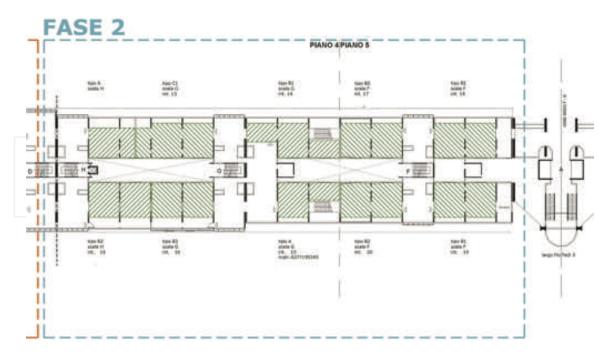


Figure 9. 'Quarto Piano', new flats, Phase 2. Credit: Ater.

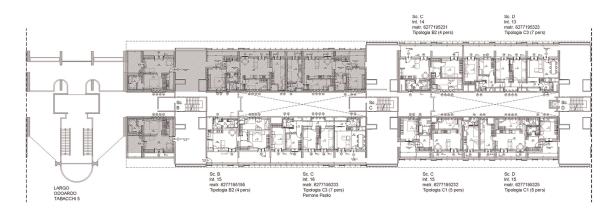


Figure 10. 'Quarto Piano', new flats, Phase 3. Credit: Ater.



Figure 11. The new flat. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.



Figure 12. *The new flat. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.*



Figure 13.The new flat. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

renewing the art and craft spaces they inhabit through the project 'Piazza delle Arti e dell'Artigianato' (**Figures 14–17**). A process called 'heritage making' has taken place, which is even more evident in the case of the 'Progetto delle Memorie', another laboratory activity. The 'Progetto delle Memorie' is a project that gives substance to the inhabitants' memories. It is the photographic and architectural inventory of the self-built houses on the 'Quarto Piano' before demolition (**Figures 18–22**). Photographs and house plans of the houses before demolition were exhibited in the spaces vacated by some of the houses, transforming the living hall of the first plot into a space for common use.

The 'Progetto delle Memorie' has given the inhabitants and all visitors a new and non-trivial view of a process of depositing housing that, even if it is outside the rules, cannot be considered marginal. The 'Quarto Piano' and the photos convey a sense of life that makes sense and dispels many of the prejudices often attributed to life in social housing.

An awareness that was then extended to the other inhabitants of the building by involving them in the 'Archivio Corviale' project, which collects photos of Corviale's first 40 years of life. The laboratory is a destination of many students from Italian and



Figure 14. Social animation, Laboratorio di Città Corviale. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.



Figure 15. Social animation, Laboratorio di Città Corviale. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

non-Italian universities who stop for a few days to study what is happening in Corviale. It is happening that an idea of urban regeneration is taking shape where the centrality of the body located in space is being redefined, even renegotiated. It has initiated a particular intertwining in which the building project, the architectural one, the housing relocation, the rights and requirements of social housing, together with the right to education and health have given shape to an expression of living in the making that can only be carried out within the dimension of everyday life, of the gesture of care and taking charge. We have called this activity social accompaniment, where the emphasis on the word accompaniment indicates taking care of care as a posture in transforming the whole city and not just the physical space. An inhabitant pronounced the title of the paragraph during a dialogue with the researchers, who explained the transfer path, the demolition work and then the new house assigned to her. An expression denotes the assumption of a dimension of living that aspires to psycho-physical well-being that goes far beyond the mere satisfaction of an essential



Figure 16. Social animation, Laboratorio di Città Corviale. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.



Figure 17. 'Progetto, Piazzetta delle arti e mestieri'. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.



Figure 18.'Progetto delle memorie', plan and pictures of the interior of the flat (Int.429) before the regeneration. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.



Figure 19. 'Progetto delle memorie', pictures of the interior of the flat (Int.306, 432, 434, and 438) before the regeneration. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

need, having a house and a roof over one's head. Regenerating meant going beyond the basic needs, and this was possible thanks to the constant presence of the third party, the university, which has (re)built a bond of trust between institutions and



Figure 20.'Progetto delle memorie', pictures of the interior of the flat (Int. 306, 432, 434, and 438) before the regeneration. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.



Figure 21.

'Progetto delle memorie', pictures of the interior of the flat (Int.306, 432, 434, and 438) before the regeneration.

Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

inhabitants. Interruptions of the construction site, bankruptcy of the construction company, and inaccuracies in the works presented as moments in which the construction of a common future were renegotiated. Things can also go wrong in urban transformation, but the lesson of the Corviale city laboratory is that regenerating can coincide with a change, even a radical one, a physical change but, above all, a change in the way of living in the city. The role that the Laboratory has built up over time inside the neighbourhood defines a series of activities. Social accompaniment in the relocation of the inhabitants, the social concierge as a mediator between the inhabitants and the Ater, cultural promotion with the 'il Progetto delle Memorie' and the transformation of the 'Piazzetta delle Arti e dell'artigianato' and, again, the project



Figure 22.

'Progetto delle memorie', pictures of the interior of the flat (Int. 306, 432, 434, and 438) before the regeneration.

Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

'Corviale si-cura' activated within the framework projects for the community provided by the ministry of Labour for citizens' income earners (**Figure 23**). The laboratory plays the role of weaving a plot around housing, working with inhabitants to take on the challenge of living together in a housing machine that has not only its rigidity but also shows an exciting ability to adapt to the deviations that life imposes on the designers' predictions. It is perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of how the neighbourhood changes, a co-evolution between the rigidity of the architectural system and the daily actions of the inhabitants who change its contents and realise the most appropriate ways of living for their needs.

5. Conclusion: it's not just a house

In Western society, the difficulty of accessing housing is one of the reasons why social inequalities among the urban population are growing; this also happens because public intervention in support of housing policies has gradually been reduced to the point of cancelling itself out [6]. Each European nation has prepared interventions

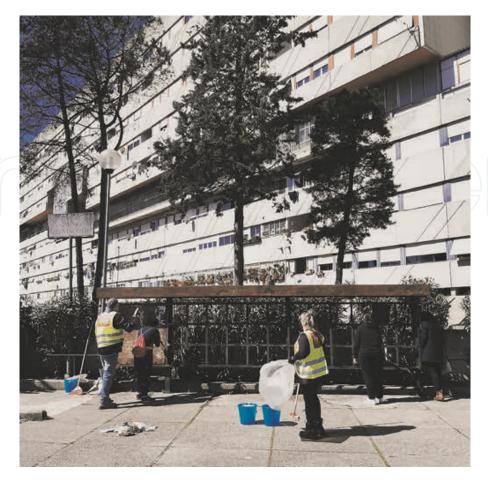


Figure 23. Social project, Corviale si-cura. Credit: Laboratorio di Città Corviale.

that are partly different but are united everywhere by choice to sell public residential assets and by growing use of the market and intermediate forms, such as social housing or relatively affordable houses to cope with the demand from the middle classes. Direct public policies that provide for the construction of housing for the less well-off social classes are lacking or at least marginal. In Italy, a further complication has been added; following the process of federal devolution, housing policies have been entrusted to the regions, which in Italy are twenty. Each region has produced at different times and with very different references, choices and in some cases, very different organic housing policies, and it is not easy to return a unitary picture of public action in Italy. Overall, the latest data on the construction of public residential housing in Italy stops in the order of a few thousand; the 1993 data, at the end of the twenty-year golden cycle of public construction in Italy, were about 40 thousand new accommodations per year. In this context, the Corviale regeneration intervention with the replacement of self-built housing by the 'squatters' represents a unique case that indicates some lines of action for possible interventions.

Meanwhile, the regeneration processes may involve the transformation of environments already built through the change of intended use from services or offices or more to public residences to be rented to the neediest families. Even if it is about houses, what comes into play is much more than just a house. It is a readjustment process involving urban and social impacts, even when it has a predominantly building character. The mechanisms underlying the regeneration processes necessarily involve the inhabitants and institutions in a dialogue, which, as demonstrated by the

activity of the 'Laboratorio di Città Corviale', constitutes the prerequisite for the regeneration process to achieve its aims and be successful.

A second lesson given by Corviale is that we can go back to designing in public neighbourhoods, a legacy of the modern movement, and find there, in those neighbourhoods, new possibilities for densification or rather intensification, in the use of the already built space that is often abandoned and underused. It is a space of action for the urban project connected to the housing demand that is also particularly important for the design results that may involve redesigning some of the principles with which those neighbourhoods were conceived and built. In some cases, fifty years after their construction, it is now possible to imagine a rehabilitation intervention that represents a new urban stratification that considers the adaptation processes that the inhabitants have brought into these architectures over time, in some cases, real machines for living. A third lesson concerns the forms of living, end of a housing model, which was concerned only with responding to the basic needs of a shelter house, has long since been sanctioned. Today, even in public housing, it is essential to focus not only on the house but on the model of living, knowing how to identify the neighbourhood even before the space of the house. In common space, necessary for the sociability of being together is presented as the place for constructing the public dimension alongside that of the private, single and individual dimensions. This alternation of rhythms and times configured in diversified spaces and housing solutions is now unavoidable in every housing project.

Moreover, finally, there is one last lesson: the processes of regeneration are accompanied by an activity of roots, which we can also call identity, which passes through the production of heritage. It is an activity that involves different aspects. Important among them are those that also involve spaces, the construction of collective memory, and the layering of signs due to cultural events intended to leave a mark on the neighbourhood's lifestyle. In the 'Laboratorio di Città Corviale' activity, participation in tenders for the Roman summer or the promotion of social and cultural integration activities has been a decisive factor in the success of the laboratory's activity and in achieving the objectives pursued by urban regeneration interventions. Ultimately, it is an agency activity that starting from the inadequacies of public institutions, especially regarding housing in sensitive neighbourhoods, carries out an important activity to promote the possibilities of the neighbourhood's physical, economic and social transformation, a role that still focuses on dialogue with the inhabitants and their direct participation in mediation. The protagonist of the inhabitants is not a convenience of the institutions, the tenders or the projects financed within the framework of specific projects represent a constant presence in the neighbourhood of this accompanying activity. 'Il Laboratorio di Città Corviale', set up by Roma Tre University, represents a case study to understand the new housing demand and the new lines of action to create public housing and accompany the physical transformation of neighbourhoods.

In conclusion, we can say that the four-year experience of regenerating Corviale, which is still ongoing, can be an important case study in the field of housing policy and public policy to observe to guide the future of housing policy. Particularly in terms of interventions in the already existing, in the already built city, where the goal is undoubtedly to make the right to a house accessible, but where the integrative dimension of urban policy also comes into play, it is about giving a house, but let us talk about much more than the individual house, it is the right to the city.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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