

## Original Paper

# The Right to Housing

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### Abstract

*Abandoned buildings, degraded neighbourhoods, places designed without taking into consideration those who will inhabit them: the survival of the city today depends on the ability to reinterpret and reinvent the use of space by bringing together different interests and opportunities. The contemporary city is transformed, day by day, redrawing its hierarchies and priorities, influenced by cultural and economic changes and their speed, it is increasingly distracted from the needs of those who should be the protagonists and promoters of this change. The text aims to open up a reflection on living by addressing one of the most urgent issues concerning the modern contemporary city, namely the quality of the enormous building heritage made up of housing districts from the last thirty years of the last century that make up a significant part of our cities.*

### Keywords

*housing, complexity, living, quality, well-being*

### 1. Introduction

In both metropolises and small towns, places are homologated to the image of contemporaneity: walking along any urban or suburban street, the fragmentation of the territory is visible in the succession of residential areas, areas dedicated to work, and commercial areas devoid of any quality declination. Urban space is perceived by the inhabitants with a sort of aesthetic-psychological indifference, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither cared for nor abandoned, a subtle detachment that unconsciously turns into suffering. Only if we have the capacity to inhabit can we build, Martin Heidegger warned us in 1954 (Heidegger, 2018), words that should make us think about what our cities have become, especially in the face of the explosion, in recent turbulent years, of urban suburbs where the social dispute has precisely as its stakes remaining in a condition of survival of evil. The essence of dwelling is ‘taking care of things’, a concept so simple as to be disarming, since it succeeds in briefly and fully describing our way of being in the world, the only one we really know: taking care of the things around us with respect. Today, however,

the complexity of our existence is not a manageable or controllable phenomenon; it lends itself to different interpretations; it requires constant adaptation to novelty and constant adjustment of the system to make it able to 'hold together' and make the different components work well. Complexity is also increasingly invoked to talk about our crises: the pandemic, environmental impacts, climate change. These crises show the complexity of our time and the unprecedented global human condition. Each of them is made up of many intertwined crises that affect one another and cannot be separated: health, biological, scientific, economic, ecological, social, anthropological, psychological, existential. In the global world, everything is connected, a continuous circularity, not a simple linearity, between causes and effects. Everything is connected and everything is simultaneously cause and effect, so it is impossible to simplify an inextricable web of contributing factors and interdependencies. The increasing significance of technology in the modern age had spread the illusion that progress was linear, guaranteed, irreversible. But it is now clear that technical progress is not in itself solely or totally progressive. It also entails and produces regressions and new forms of barbarism. The relevance of technologies had also spread the illusion that the human species would definitively free itself from nature. Thinking about the complexity of the world and the human condition means, in fact, thinking that 'everything is connected', 'everything is related'. To lose this fundamental awareness, to abstract oneself from this living and connected whole, exposes man to serious risks, and 'the very basis of his existence collapses' (Ceruti, 2024). Discarded buildings, degraded areas and neighborhoods, but also places designed without taking into account who will inhabit them: our survival today depends on the ability to reinterpret and reinvent the use of the city's spaces by bringing together different interests and opportunities. The contemporary city is transformed, day by day, redrawing its hierarchies and priorities, influenced by cultural and economic changes and their speed, it is increasingly distracted from the needs of those who should be the protagonists and promoters of this change. People more and more often feel excluded, rightly or wrongly, from the dynamics of transformation, almost as if they thought they were not the architects of it or even that they were suffering without any possibility of opposing such systemic processes (Sposito, 2012). Life is becoming more and more expensive and sometimes even dangerous. Right to housing and inclusiveness seem to be at risk because we are witnessing a progressive expulsion from the city of so many social and economic realities that have contributed to building it. Property prices continue to rise, making it difficult to find affordable solutions not only for buying but also for renting. Thus begins a slow process of re-appropriation of spaces '[...] that of intermediate spaces. Residual, undecided and restless spaces [...]' They bring with them important questions of the right to the city and the right to inhabit, modulated on the thousands of (social and environmental) differences, desires and plural movements that characterize it and solicit, therefore, a new reflection around the binomial city and democracy' (Rossi, 2016). This contribution originates from the desire to explore the concept of living and the related situations of discomfort that do not end with the quality and adequacy of housing but invest the system of relationships with the surrounding environment, the management of common and relational spaces, the perception of one's own condition and space (Cellini & Saracino, 2020). The theme of living is topical and disruptive

today precisely because of certain critical issues that have contributed to shifting its essence towards technical specializations aimed more at the building than at the inhabitant.

## 2. The Complexity of Housing (Method)

The desire and need to inhabit are inherent in human nature, throughout history man has transformed places by making them comfortable and adapting them to his lifestyle, thus seeking to satisfy a primary need of his, this effort to change the structure of the environment to the practical and symbolic needs of the community has been scientifically recognised as physiological. As Walter Benjamin wrote (Benjamin, 2000) to inhabit is to leave traces, therefore, it is not only to live, but also to reflect on oneself. By inhabiting we communicate something to others. In this way, the home is seen as a metaphor for one's soul. In a humanistic-existential psychological perspective, Maslow, in the elaboration of his 'pyramid of needs', places dwelling among the needs for security, immediately after the physiological, and therefore basic, needs of breathing, drinking and eating (Maslow, 2010).

Originally, this manifested itself in highly varied architectural and settlement realizations because they were consistent with the diversity of desires and, above all, the specificities of places, an adaptation of space that did not alter its nature but harmoniously arranged it to define spaces for exclusive or community use, an attitude that determined the meaning of the word 'living' and caused different typological and architectural characteristics to be defined for different geographical areas: technical capabilities, availability of resources, cultural connotations and geo-morphological and climatic characteristics have for centuries been the generators of architectural solutions congruent with the life of peoples (Di Giulio & Balzani, 2021).

The housing issue has been discussed for decades from a political-economic-social and naturally architectural perspective. Many architectural and urban interventions have proven to be interesting and positive models to follow, especially for the technical solutions and technological specifications that have defined effective responses to the general need for environmental sustainability. To this we can trace every consideration regarding the responsible use of resources, energy saving and efficiency, and environmental protection. This is an area that has been extensively investigated and that now has an extensive specialist literature of manuals, guidelines, protocols and digital models. Almost to the point of thinking that living is an exclusively technical problem and not a spatial or social one, linked to the characteristics of the building envelope (Lucarelli et al., 2020), to climate change (Davino & Bassolino, 2019) or to the new IT and mathematical systems, albeit suggested by European Directives, towards energy transition (Massari, 2022; Azzalin, 2024). This can be dangerous because Edgar Morin himself, one of the leading theorists of complexity, has long since warned us of the dangers inherent in any paradigm that claims to understand reality in a disjunctive and specialized form, incapable of seeing the deep connections that bind the parts of a system, of whatever type it may be (Morin, 2017), excluding any approach that instead reads contemporary reality from an economic but also political and social point

of view in an ever closer connection between spheres. An approach that deals holistically with the critical elements of problems, from which to derive possible solutions necessary for the final recompositing. Here we do not want to demonize the technical solution and the research that has been done on it for a few decades now, but alongside these, we need to start thinking again that the complexity of living includes many other aspects (DeKay & Tornieri, 2023). As a matter of fact, in parallel with housing well-being and discomfort, a malaise ‘from the housing problem’ is emerging, which is as widespread as it is difficult to intercept and which almost never passes through the conventional physical-technical indicators of discomfort: it is the malaise that derives from having to commit many resources, both economic and organizational and planning, to living in a manner appropriate to one’s needs and availabilities of that moment’ (Olagnero, 1998)

This situation is further aggravated by recent events that show how ‘[...] the right to housing and inclusiveness seem to be at risk because we are witnessing a progressive expulsion from the city of so many social and economic realities that have contributed to building it’ (Panarella, 2024).

Housing implies an active role of the inhabitant both in the production of his own living environment and in the resolution of housing problems (Tosi, 1994), and in the light of what has been said, the quality of living cannot but be understood as a concept rich in different dimensions, which in turn can be broken down into many sub-dimensions and indicators. This should push us to ‘[...] search for operational methods to realign production processes with realization processes, process quality with project quality, to enable a renewed dialogue between the various stakeholders, simultaneously controlling costs, techniques and financing and shortening the distance between production and realization of redevelopment interventions’ (Block et al., 2019).

Without ignoring a further uncomfortable condition that concerns the suitability and state of preservation of the building, housing and common areas. In public housing, the structural condition of housing and buildings often depends on the quality of the building design, the materials used, but also on the age of the structures. The assessment of characteristics in relation to upgrading changes the quality of living for users considerably. This dimension underlines the distance that may exist between designers and social housing inhabitants in terms of class affiliation and cultural referents, a distance that may have repercussions on how these two types of actors assess the characteristics of housing and buildings (Sposito, 2012).

Remembering the rationalist tradition, architects identify elementary human needs to be satisfied in housing and from these they hypothesize a level of satisfaction of these needs in terms of ventilation, overlooks, cubage, endowments and equipment; in practice setting building standards, which in western countries have since become law. The adoption of building standards had the historical merit of eliminating unhealthy housing but understood the evaluation of the built environment in functional, sectoral and timeless terms. Instead, the experience of needs and the evaluation of the satisfaction of those needs is made by users in relational, diachronic and contextualized terms (Signorelli, 1989).

Contemporary culture has altered the concept of living, separating the ability to be able to use a place with that of being familiar with the place itself, thus denying that sense of belonging to places in which it was possible to recognize one's own historical-cultural imprint. Spaces are planned by the P.A. and designed by professionals based on rigid building tools and innovative software for managing construction processes, the so-called 'spontaneous' architecture is not tolerated by the legislative apparatus that contemplates the concept of building abuse. The reason for giving rules for doing architecture is easily understandable and objectively necessary, the urban planning legislation in Italy born in 1842 to remedy the hygienic-sanitary emergency that broke out in Naples due to the sudden increase in population in a built environment inadequate in terms of quality and quantity of housing and services. But why is it that first modern culture, and now contemporary culture, are so far removed from the knowledge that over the centuries has determined settlement contexts capable of satisfying the needs and desires of the inhabitants and facilitating a simply pleasant life? Why has the regulatory apparatus excluded inhabitants from the governance of territories and denied them the possibility of modifying and managing their own and urban spaces?

### 3. Result

Excluding any demagogic discourse, if on the one hand we like to think that at last the community, aware of its rights (Lefebvre, 2013), is making its way through the rules imposed on it more by market logic than by social analysis, on the other we believe how dangerous the city can also be as a result of practices of use in space that blow up the usual margins between legal and illegal, public and private (Balducci, 2008). Spaces where new poverties and social inequalities take shape, but which produce, at the same time, a creative redefinition of city environments, strategies for survival that open up prospects for new democratic experimentation. The aim here is not to make value judgements, but to investigate a phenomenon that has always been present in our cities, in order to bring these 'contested spaces', and therefore at risk of conflict, back to a dimension of acceptability, political mediation and negotiation. '[...] Conflict is not only a constitutive part of our being a society, of urban coexistence precisely because it is a coexistence of diversities, it is also a very important part of it because it is the virtual place where cultures, models, ideas, values and meanings are compared and re-elaborated. It is what keeps the establishing society and the established society in a constructive and productive relationship' (Cellamare, 2008). The reaction of citizens is understandable even if not always shareable: transformations improve the habitability of places by making them more suitable to their own interests, but sometimes motivated by low budgets they accept solutions that attest to people's resilience to the overbearingness of cities. Our development model has long since stopped looking backwards, basing itself exclusively on the concept of growth chasing globalization models that are now the same all over the planet, but this cannot be the only way forward. Looking with great attention to the adaptability of places by communities is not a simplistic way of privatizing their living space but is a cry from the citizens who do not agree with these impositions, it means 'patching up' when the institution is distracted or worse absent, it means

recovering with their own hands places left to abandonment. This kind of approach, in our opinion, aligns well with what Serge Latouche (Latouche, 2008) has been writing for some time about degrowth philosophy both as a critique of the capitalist model and as a response to the need for change invoked by the Earth. '[...] Rebalancing the relationship between man and man, re-establishing the link with the earth and rediscovering dialogue with the other, breaking down the barriers created by economism, technicism and globalization are the goals of degrowth'. Degrowth is a voluntary choice, not an imposed one. It is therefore not a single model of life that can be unconditionally applied in every country in the world, but rather an economic, philosophical and political alternative to be realized concretely and in an autonomous and diversified manner in the multiple territorial realities that make up the planet.

Reasonableness and measure can be used to modify our daily life choices, also allowing us to reduce our impact on the biosphere, respecting settled communities. By re-appropriating the temporal dimension in relation to the rhythms of seasonality, the economy will no longer be hegemonic of actions and choices, time will no longer be solely dedicated to work and production, but will become free time of creation and thought, and memory and history will be fundamental to reconstructing the present according to the wisdom of the ancients, looking towards a future that allows for the enhancement of human potential, while respecting the planet. As an alternative to today's socio-economic system, growth will not be an end, but human progress, ethical and aesthetic growth, as well as cultural, political and economic growth. Opening a reflection on housing means tackling one of the most urgent issues concerning the modern contemporary city: that is, the enormous building legacy made up of housing districts from the last thirty years of the last century, houses, public and conventionally built, which make up a significant part of our cities. A current and not special building, conceived and realized according to the building practices of the modern 20th century: reinforced concrete cage systems, saving of the economic resources employed, from a functional optimization of spaces, according to a conception of public housing, today critical and obsolete (Paris & Bianchi, 2018). The house has long since abandoned the appearance of a place consecrated by those who live in it to take on the guise of a hybrid and multifunctional space because of changed habits and a new everyday life. These are also accompanied by new sensitivities that, also due to the environmental emergency, we feel are very close to us and influence our choices: we are looking for houses with a focus on energy efficiency, which takes the form of solar panels, condensation boilers, functional fixtures, thermal coats and ventilation and air recycling systems. Intervening, then, on this immense heritage is not a simple maquillage operation, the building envelope should not be considered the support through which to perform the aesthetic facelift, but the technological place of complexity where the economic and innovation conditions are created for the implementation of interventions for their requalification, especially due to the fact that most of the heritage is characterized by a high energy consumption that obliges families to use about 10% of their income to be able to live comfortably. The question, then, is to question the principles, among the many existing ones, that guide the project today. Is it more important to focus on the protection of the environment, the well-being and health of users, or does it also concern social and economic issues at a time when it is proposed as a cultural, social,

ecological and economic change necessary to safeguard future generations. The various modes of contemporary living are strongly conditioned by the socio-cultural and economic dynamics that have invested our cities: aided by globalization, the market increasingly demands precariousness and flexibility of employment; these dynamics urge forms of living, working and urban spaces to adapt to the changing needs of users (Rossi, 2016). We have perhaps left too much to technology, which certainly provides us with the tools through which we can draw the likely scenarios by interpreting the exponential transformation of the physical world around us. The propensity to change should not be understood as mere adaptation to the needs of the economy but should be interpreted from the perspective of development and individual opportunities; it allows the individual to rethink training, life and employment prospects, to elaborate and integrate, in an active and participatory manner, new approaches to the hypercomplex world.

#### 4. Discussion

In the face of the social, economic and cultural changes underway, cities are called upon to modify and reorganize inhabited space no longer using the old development logics but with new principles, using critical situations as opportunities to rethink the functions of places and developing new synergies between the public, private and social spheres, and when the institutions fail, it is the citizens and communities that have to adapt and adjust places to their needs. Questioning the right to live and the attention we should pay to users also means thinking about what domestic relations and what symbolic order of the family we intend to build, trying to reflect on the dramatic events in which the home is transformed from a protective membrane of freedom into a trap for the victims of a culture of patriarchy still present in our country (De Vito, 2023). There is no longer a single idea of dwelling or of possession of living space. The individual environment is designed to be balanced between solitude and family relationships. It is evident that the era in which we live forces man to come to terms with a series of economic, social and cultural revolutions that make him rediscover the 'multiplicity' of dimensions that characterize his living. Sooner or later, the world will have to get into the order of introducing some changes before the next global disaster. But changes in the wake of a crisis are not necessarily the best way to reform the communal, national or global economic system. Today, the new needs that contemporary living demands of architecture and cities means that design must become an interpreter of places and the needs of inhabitants through appropriate solutions. Whether it is a question of interventions in urban peripheries, in minor centers, in the slums of council houses or in disused industrial areas, an action is required that guarantees direct and indirect benefits, that interprets the desires of the communities involved and that responds to the new environmental paradigms. The construction of a participatory economy that starts from the bottom, by the new generation of citizens, resilient and active, connective and connected, moving around the city and learning about the world through digital platforms and demonstrating that value can be generated even without maximizing profit, that collective wellbeing cannot be measured solely by a financial yardstick, and that the ecosystem can evolve if circular

processes of value generation and sharing are put in place. An economy based on collaboration between actors that are no longer rigidly divided into sectors, but tend to hybridize in order to respond more and more effectively to social needs would all make sense for a regeneration of our cities, but even more so of our society under the banner of sustainability and widespread well-being. In the circular dimension economy and environment are complementary terms of a broader idea of well-being.

The right to housing is today badly interpreted as the need to own housing, with the result that architectural production is encouraged which is at odds with communities and their habits and legitimate speculative real estate activities. The right to housing, on the other hand, is something else, it means finding identity in places, having the possibility of belonging to them, living in them; it means having the freedom to build your own community through the use of spaces suited to specific needs and behaviors. The right to housing today refers to the need to find a different method of architectural and urban planning and design in which the methods of decision, application and action of interventions are conducted horizontally through forms of coordination and collaboration rather than vertical forms of control, a favor of new roles and relationships between the actors involved in the construction process (Sivori, 2016). The inhabitants must be given an active role in the decision-making and operational processes of architectural production, while the designer must recover the ethical and social role that belongs to him, contributing to improving the environmental and social conditions of the territories and the settled populations. Ride the change, rather than being overwhelmed by it; acting on a project-based basis, rather than prostrating oneself to manage the existing situation with emergency measures: these are the challenges that active orientation strategies must grasp, developing a political and administrative vision, even before the operational level.

Architecture today has the obligation to give an appropriate response to the need for social sustainability, i.e. the request for psycho-physical well-being, in fact, although unconsciously compared to other factors that are known to affect this area, such as for example education or equity, built space is crucial for well-being and quality of life, taking on the responsibility of indicating possible forms of combining the processes of personal fulfillment with the expansion of the economic and social horizon.

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