

The Processes Behind Community Building and Place Making in Transitional Urban Moments: A Comparison Between China and Italy

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Abstract The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the transition from a planned economy to a market economy at the end of the 1970s, and the pursuit of a broader contact with the outside world are all moments which brought considerable changes to the Chinese urban context on various scales. The shaping of the physical environment witnessed significant changes and transitions; however, some urban elements like the enclosure, the wall, and the gate persisted, and their existence is unquestionable in today's Chinese cities. The concept of collectivism, anatomized from its very traditional meaning, was transformed by the socialist ideology first, and then the market-oriented philosophy later to a tool for the redefinition of the meaning of community and community building in the mutable urban context. Similarly, since the reconstruction after World War II, Italy witnessed big changes as well as the search for an urban modernity and identity, emphasizing a strong link between physical form and community building. This paper, using a comparative approach, opts to analyze how existing urban concepts have been transformed and how new mechanisms and processes emerged in community building and place making in China, focusing on the socialist and post-socialist periods, and in Italy, focusing on the aftermath of WWII till the late 1970s. The new social and urban challenges imposed by the transitional circumstances led to the adoption of alternative paradigms in both cases. In China, comprehensive development and the re-discovery of the human dimension of cities became an important focus, while the re-invention of traditional urban forms and the humanistic dimension of industrialization became one of the main concepts in community building and place making in the Italian urban context.

Keywords place-making; community-building; China; Italy

Challenges imposed by shifts in the political, economic, and social systems are generally associated with periods in which cities became laboratories either for the reconsideration of lost values and design principles, or for the invention of alternative means and mechanisms to achieve new ones. Western and Asian landscapes were concerned with deep changes characterized by new urban experiences and distinct approaches to city reconstruction and re-thinking. This paper aims to track how, in the Western urban context, Italy, in the aftermath of WWII, faced the new urban questions imposed by its injured cities in terms of community building and place making, and how China dealt with similar challenges imposed instead by the historical transition from "cities of production" to "cities of consumption," under the new economic, housing, and land reforms.

China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy led to broad changes in the socio-spatial structure of many Chinese cities. Community building and place making were part of important transformations, and new mechanisms have been orchestrated to shape them in the era of free market consumption, generally resulting in a process of social polarization and spatial fragmentation. The collapse of the danwei system, which was the essential element of urban society, governing almost all the aspects of its members' life from employment to basic daily-life activities (Wang,

2013), represented a crucial moment in the larger context of transformations that have re-shaped Chinese cities during the reform era. In a different transitional urban context, Italy was faced with the big challenge of reconstruction after WWII, which resulted in the development of new urban notions, trying to shape places with and for the communities. The uncontrolled individual mobility from the countryside to cities, as well as from the southern regions towards the more developed and industrialized northern ones, saw Italy concerned with new social and urban issues, which led to the emergence of specific concepts and approaches in the re-making of Italian cities.

Given the specificity of the Chinese and Italian contexts, this paper adopts a chronological description of the evolution and transformation of three important components of the Chinese urban socio-spatial fabric in the transitional period: the physical enclosure, the work-living relationship, and the social composition of the Chinese communities in both the socialist and post-socialist era. Instead, for the Italian experience, case studies have been selected to grasp the new notions and design principles, such as the village-neighbourhood, the humanistic dimension of industrialization, the built environment as a unit, and the public dimension of urban centralities, which are introduced to create new urban experiences and reconnect places and communities. Although analyzing different urban

contexts characterized by their specific cultural, socio-spatial, and political economic constituents, the purpose of this paper is to focus mainly on the different factors that led to new practices and meanings in community building and place making both in China and Italy. The mechanisms behind the transformation of the three main elements of the Chinese urban context in the transitional period from a planned economy to a market economy, and the new concepts introduced in the Italian urban context to reshape its cities in the post-war period of WWII, are respectively analyzed in the following sections.

1. Place making and community building during China's planned economy period

1.1 "Multi-walled compounds": the walled not fortified danwei system

Chinese cities are generally defined as walled cities and inward-looking communities (Dutton, 1998; Knapp, 2000; Bray, 2005; Huang, 2006). There is an extensive literature on the practice of enclosure as a unique characteristic which distinguished the socio-spatial structure of Chinese cities since ancient times (see Figure 1)

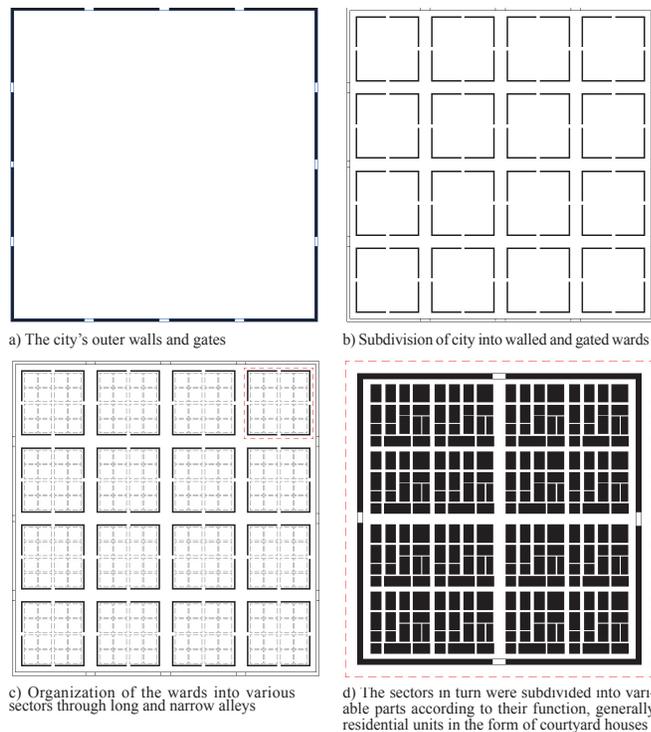


Figure 1 Schematic illustration of the typical urban structure of a Chinese city during the Tang Dynasty
Source: Hamama, 2017.

(Wu, 2005; Huang, 2006; Pow, 2009; Miao and Zhen, 2009; Hamama, 2017). This paper will focus on the purpose of gating in the danwei^① or work-unit system and in the gated communities that re-emerged in the post-socialist period. The danwei system refers to the main socialist urban entity acting as the main tool for the allocation of resources, organization of production and employment, and most importantly the basic social structure for urban residents' lives (Bray, 2005; Lu, 2006; Wang, 2013).

Despite their different features, such as the size, the differentiated socio-spatial composition, the proximity of workplace and residence, as well as the rationalist and standardized architectural layout (Bray, 2005; Lu, 2006), one obvious feature of the danwei was its walls (Wang, 2013). Although the first danwei built in the 1950s were not walled, walls enclosing their territory appeared in the 1960s to protect their land and other resources (Lu, 2006). The wall, physically separating the danwei from its surrounding, became gradually the urban rule in force and every work-unit was enclosed within walls. Besides the walls enclosing the danwei, different functions within it could be enclosed too, which transformed it into a "multi-walled compound" (Wang, 2013). The work-unit "became a miniature city within its own walls, offering residents spaces for work and for play, for home life and for neighbourhood life" (Gaubatz, 1995). The danwei, playing a sophisticatedly orchestrated role in the life of its residents, became almost the only place they associated themselves with. This particular situation is referred to by Walder (1986) as "organized dependence" upon systematized collective consumption offered within the walls of the danwei.

1.2 Homogenous lifestyle and social heterogeneity within the danwei compounds

Guided by the socialist "egalitarian" ideology and, most importantly focusing on the individual as a potential manufacturer rather than a consumer, the danwei was characterized by a relative homogeneous lifestyle reflected in its standardized living spaces and in the collectivized living habits of its members. However, the walled danwei compounds were distinguished by a considerable social heterogeneity and sense of community with a strong affiliation to the work-unit that quasi symbolized an extended family. Sharing the same spaces and living within the same enclosed work-unit compound, the members of a work-unit generally developed a strong attachment to the place of residence (Wu, 2005; Wang, 2013). Although the danwei had their specific rules to assign housing based on various criteria and the existence of a hierarchical system, the degree of differentiation in terms of living standards remained relatively low (Wang, 2013).

1.3 The danwei: “autonomous cities within the city”

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the danwei became the main socio-spatial element and the dominant urban structure of Chinese cities, playing a decisive role in community building. Due to the limited resources, there was an urgent need to reduce consumption and maximize production, combining economic, political, and social functions in one single socio-spatial entity (Parish and Parish, 1986). Hence, the danwei system proved to be an efficient tool to accomplish the socialist state’s ambition of “production first and livelihood second,” allowing for a comprehensive control over the activities of production and distribution of social services, as well as maintenance of social control and stability. Generally, the danwei was based on a close proximity of working and living areas, providing its inhabitants with a variety of welfare services and facilities all enclosed within bounded urban cells that became effectively autonomous “cities within the city” (see Figure 2).

But prior to the adoption of the danwei system as the dominant urban unit, the early years of the People’s Republic of China saw Chinese urban planners involved in the experimentation of various urban models, especially from the Soviet Union, looking for the best urban form that would have allowed them to meet the new requirements of an industrial city. At the beginning of the 1950s, the concept of the “Neighbourhood Unit,” proposed in the 1920s by American architect Clarence Perry, was introduced in the planning and design of public housing areas, although few projects have been realized according to this approach. Consequently, the Soviet-style neighbourhood concept, the perimeter block, was introduced but short-lived too as its morphological features emphasized a European-style spatial layout characterized by mainly east-west oriented dwellings, which was in contradiction with the living habits



Figure 2 The Meishan Ironworks work-unit (1969 – 1971)

Note: Located twenty kilometres away from the city of Nanjing, this work-unit was developed as a company town complete with housing and essential facilities such as apartment buildings, canteens, nursery and kindergarten, primary school, market, grocery shops, cinema, post office, and bank.

Source: Hamama, 2017.

of many Chinese residents (Lu, 2006). It was replaced by another Soviet planning principle, the Residential District or “micro rayon” (Grava, 1993), which was first used in the 1935 Moscow Plan, as a self-contained residential district based on the integration of housing and facilities and the allocation of community services according to the number of its residents (Bater, 1980). The micro rayon soon inspired the Chinese socialist state for its efficiency in organizing residents’ lives and distributing facilities economically.

1.4 The need for “integrated” development: the introduction of the hierarchical planning system in the place-making of Chinese cities

Although, the Chinese socialist planning ideology based on the danwei was considerably influenced by the Soviet experience, “the work-unit compound model ultimately went much further in its attempt to integrate working and living space than the Soviet model did, whose principal urban unit, the micro rayon, was based on residential districts spatially separated from the workplace” (Gaubatz, 1995). Effectively, during the socialist period, each work-unit became an independent compound, with almost completely autonomous control over its functions of production and social welfare (Bray, 2005). With its planning concept of residential areas supplied with a comprehensive variety of communal public services, the Residential Quarter became a basic unit for the planning and design of residential areas in China. Like the “Soviet micro rayon moving up in scale to more complete districts and ultimately to full-scale towns or ‘gorodskoy rayon,’ China also adopted a hierarchical system with increasing level of residentially related services” (Rowe et al., 2016). This planning concept would have its extensive application during the period of decentralization and market-oriented reforms. In the 1980s, following the government’s requirement for urban development to proceed according to the “six integrations” of planning, investment, design, construction, distribution, and management (Wang and Murie, 1999), a comprehensive development strategy guided most of the new large-scale projects (Wang and Murie, 1999), and development projects carried by individual work-units were abandoned.

2. The era of big reforms and the socio-spatial transitions in the Chinese urban context

2.1 The re-emergence of the wall and the way towards social segregation

The transition in the meaning of the gate and generally the socio-spatial changes, since the decline of the danwei system, can only be embraced if positioned in the broad transition from a planned economy to a market economy since the late 1970s, including housing

commodification, differentiation of housing consumption, and land reforms (Wang and Murie, 1999; Wu, 1996; Lu et al., 2001; Wang, 2013). In the 1990s, the transformation of China from a welfare-based housing system and the establishment of a housing market represented a turning point in the Chinese urban history. The new housing reforms allowed the market forces and the private enterprises to play an increasing role in the economy as a whole and in the production and consumption of housing in particular (Wang and Murie, 1999). Land reforms in the 1980s played a decisive role in the establishment of a housing market system in China (Wang and Murie, 1999). In this period, “home” became the most important new form of private property for urban Chinese (Feng, 2003). The wall re-emerged embodying new meanings and reflecting the mentality of a society in gradual transition from socialist-collectivism to a market-oriented system. Governments of all levels have included gating residential areas as part of their programs (Miao, 2003) and most of the newly built housing areas during the process of housing commodification were surrounded by walls or fences (Wang and Murie, 1999).

Evidently, the collapse of the danwei, with its rigid spatial restrictions, resulted in more individual autonomy and the rise of a consumerist culture (Wang, 1995). The re-emergence of the wall seems to express also the desire for privacy and freedom from the surveillance of the state (Wu, 2018). To encourage housing consumption, the production of new lifestyle products, in contrast to the uniformity and collectiveness of the previous period, became the selling point for most private developers and actively re-defined the Chinese urban context (Wu, 2010). Compared to the standardized and monotonous urban landscape of the danwei compounds, the new commodity housing developments are becoming highly diversified in their architectural forms, expressing new ideals and lifestyle tendencies. However, while the economic reform allowed the establishment of a private housing industry, “it has not produced enough high-income and middle-income families to sustain the emerging housing market” (Wang and Murie, 1999).

2.2 From all-inclusive totalitarian danwei compounds to anonymous gated communities

The decline of the danwei system and the re-making of the urban space in the context of economic reforms and rapid urban growth, resulted in new socio-spatial trends which significantly altered the social geography of Chinese cities. Housing reform based on the market economy has caused new forms of residential segregation defined by socio-economic status (Huang, 2005). In post-reform China, the unprecedented gap between those who could afford the

market prices in the era of free consumption and those who couldn't, resulted in the dissolution of the homogeneous cityscape of the socialist city. In the emerging diversified socio-spatial urban places, fragmentation is now expressing the desire of the rising communities for a new identity, symbolized by their socio-economic status and away from the all-totalitarian and egalitarianism philosophy of the socialist period. Social ramifications have been intensified after reforms and the proof is a new residential landscape. People are sorted according to their income into commodity housing, ranging from affordable housing to luxury villas, and from housing in work-unit compounds and old neighbourhoods to migrant enclaves (Hu and Kaplan, 2001; Lu et al., 2001; Lu, 2006; Huang, 2005; Wang, 2013). If the work-unit as the main focus of urban life resulted in a small community atmosphere lacking anonymity (Dutton, 1998), the new gated communities emerged with the economic reforms resulted instead in purified and anonymous residences aiming to reduce the all-inclusive relations of the communist period (Wu, 2005).

2.3 Jobs-housing separation and the new adjustments to the hierarchical planning system

The danwei system served the purposes of an industrial city; however, the transition to a market-oriented economy traced the way for its decline, although in a quite progressive way. Under the planned economy, the multi-functions performed by a single danwei made it, as previously explained, an independent city with limited interaction with the surrounding urban context, and the social resources were not shared among the different danwei compounds, making it an inefficient system in various aspects. In an era of free consumption, it was necessary to disintegrate the work-unit system into its components, delinking workplace and residence, in order to use the now priceless land efficiently and to facilitate housing privatization. The development strategy previously carried out by the single work-units, planning for their single needs as autonomous cells, is now being replaced by a new concept calling for comprehensive development trying to reshape the city as the interlink of different activities and land uses. The planning ideology based on the three hierarchical levels introduced during the planned economy, was further encouraged and revised as the main planning tool for the allocation of resources, and the provision of the basic public services in a continuously diversified and heterogeneous socio-spatial context. According to the *National Code of Urban Planning and Design for Residential Districts* (GB50180-2002), the residential areas are planned and designed following a hierarchical structure based on the number of residents and households: Residential District (“juzhuqu” in Chinese, with 30,000 – 50,000 residents or 10,000 – 16,000 households), Residential Quarter or Residential Community

(“xiaoqu” in Chinese, with 10,000 – 15,000 residents or 3,000 – 5,000 households), Residential Cluster (“zutuan” in Chinese, with 1,000 – 3,000 residents or 300 – 1,000 households) (Li, 2011) (see Figure 3).

However, due to the continuous separation of jobs and housing as well as because of the fast transition in the Chinese communities’ lifestyle and consumption modes, the planning ideology based on the allocation of public services and facilities according to the number of residents, showed many limitations and was heavily criticized, especially because of its inadaptability to changing market demand for more diversified services and consumption options. Many cities have revised their standards for residential planning and design, proposing new ideologies like the “15-minute, 10-minute, and 5-minute” pedestrian scale neighborhoods, aiming to reduce the size of the residential blocks and putting more emphasis on the distribution of public service facilities. The new concept is based on the principle that residents can walk 15 minutes or 10 minutes to meet their cultural and material needs, and find their basic living services within 5 minutes’ walk. Many changes, in fact, have been approved in the recent version of the *National Code of Urban Planning and Design for Residential Districts* (GB50180-2018).

3. Transition to an urban modernity: place making and community building in the Italian context

3.1 The village-neighbourhood

In the post-war period, Italian cities were challenged by both the issue of reconstruction after the war bombing destructions and the demographic expansion. One of the first concepts adopted was the village-neighbourhood. The space of the rural village and the related communal values became the matrix for re-imagining neighbourhoods and their space as incubators of urban experiences and urban design solutions for both those who lost their home in the bomb strike and those who abandoned the impoverished countryside searching for fortune in the major cities. Under the umbrella of the INA-casa national plan, two rounds of 7-year programs engaged Italian administrators and designers in a race to rapidly build a considerable amount of housing compounds. A total of 5,036 Italian municipalities out of 7,995 had INA-casa projects built between 1949 and 1963, experimenting with outstanding design in terms of functional and distributive layouts, as well as operational reinvention of traditional forms of construction, which enabled for urban project a more pragmatic entry to the innovation and progress discourse (Di Biagi, 2001; Pilat, 2016; Basso and Marchigiani, 2018).

The Falchera neighbourhood (1951 – 1960), located in Turin, with a

population of 6,000 inhabitants and 1,500 dwellings spread over 33 ha, with a lower density than what the regulatory plan required for that sub-area, has a spatial organization following an open courts scheme aiming at the preservation of the semi-rural character of the district (Pace, 2001) (see Figure 4). References to a range of updated

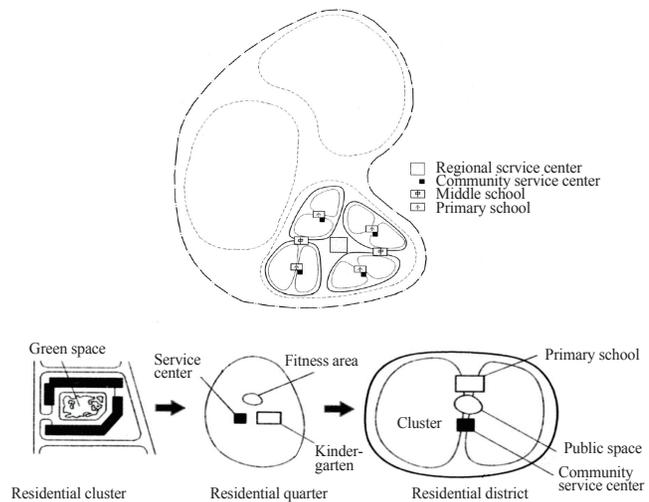


Figure 3 The three-level structure of the residential areas

Source: Courtesy of Zhang Helin, Tsinghua University, and edited by Badiaa Hamama.



Figure 4 Falchera (1951 – 1960), Turin

Source: Lanteri and Margaria, 2018.

urban models were rather explicit: from North-American greenbelts to Swedish social housing districts. As for many of the INA-casa compounds, the design of the Falchera neighbourhood traced back to a positivist approach, the interpretation of building standards and rules by the design coordinator Giovanni Astengo, in order to confirm a public discourse based on spatial solutions to urgent social needs. On the occasion of the end of Falchera's building work, Giovanni Astengo published a report in the magazine *Metron* (1954) that attributed a formative importance to the constructive solution, capable of guiding the inhabitants towards a new way of community life.

Facing the rapidly increasing built stock, an important reflection on construction regulation started making simplicity and constructive rationality an essential virtue. The construction of urban design projects, in the post-war period, was generally characterized by the lack of skilled workers. However, due to the high rate of unemployment and abundance of workforce, one of the main scopes of the INA-casa national plan was to provide work opportunities to unskilled workers, mostly hired by small and, in most cases, not specialized enterprises. The think tank, coordinated by Mario Riboldi, who produced *The Architect's Handbook* (1945-46) exemplified better than any other initiative the directions for the majority of design professionals in Italy, as well as the concerns in professional training: simplicity in imagery, pragmatic use of references, and the value in constructive rationality in order to better approach professional work conditions.

3.2 The humanistic dimension of industrialization

The transition to a modern society through a new concept of work and space was another important concept of reference in the post-war Italian context. In particular, work was intended not simply as the result of industrialisation, but as the humanistic dimension of production. In this sense, an industrial neo-humanism found much relevance in the North American culture and then reached Italy thanks to the experience of Adriano Olivetti. He reflected on the need to handle industrialisation in relation to community building, particularly in a context such as post-war Italy. Olivetti argued that the socio-technical dimension of industrialisation and progress, more than the production of goods, are the foundations for the community and the potential link between technical work and art work.

Adriano Olivetti turned the typewriter factory his father had founded into an alternative model for an industrial city based on a social and productive system inspired by the community: a concept that embodied industrial, human, and social values of environmental,

urban, and architectural planning (Olivetti and Saibene, 1960). Hiring some of the leading architects at the time, such as Figini and Pollini, Olivetti built new neighbourhoods for his workers, carefully designed with wide green areas and with three- to four-storey housing complexes. In particular, Gabetti e Isola built the Western Residential Centre, better known as Talponia (1969 – 1971), to accommodate employees as temporarily residents in Ivrea. The hypogeum building used the artificially created sloping ground to create a two-storey complex with a semi-circular plan of 300 metres long (see Figure 5). The building dealt with the interesting theme of the relationship between architecture and nature, with the dwellings facing a shared natural space.

On these intellectual bases, Olivetti and other figures established new connections between industry and designers, via an understanding of progress and industrialisation as cultural processes of building a modern society (Olmo, 2018). In the text *L'architettura, la comunità e l'urbanistica*, Olivetti clearly defines the role that architectural and urban projects can play for the community in an industrial society: urban planners and architects are “a stable,

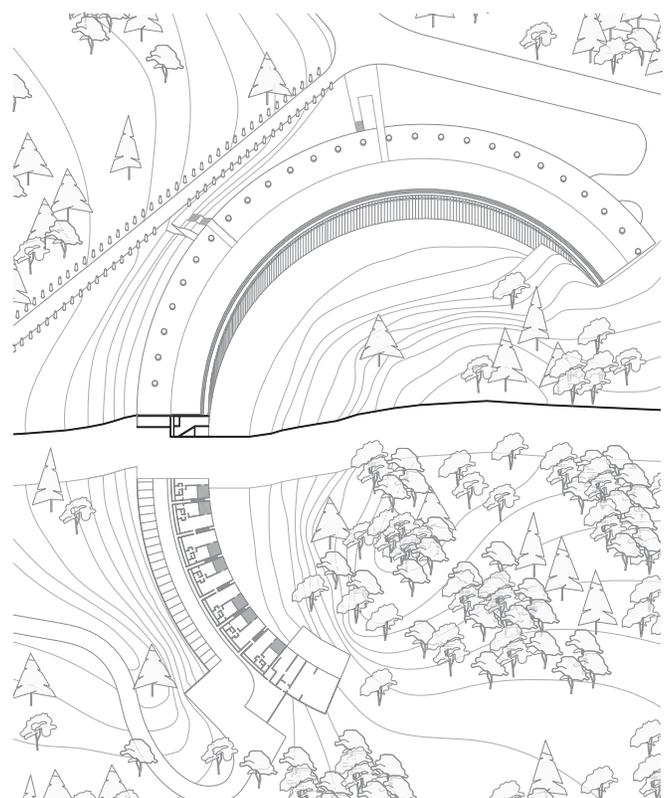


Figure 5 Western Residential Centre (1969 – 1971), Ivrea
Source: Lanteri and Margaria, 2018.

fertile, sophisticated, newly acculturated, democratic authority able to build the new City, which will live only on universal, organic, unitary choices.”

3.3 The built environment as a unit

The third frame of reference towards the definition of an Italian urban modernity was based on the notion of the “built environment.” The transition of the focus from single buildings to a wider notion of a built environment, in which buildings are meaningful altogether and support an idea of community, dates back to Gustavo Giovannoni. Yet, Rogers (1954), recognized a special focus in Italy on the urban fabric as an overall value that does not depend on monumental architectural exceptions. After years of urban disembowelment brought by Fascism, the defence of the link between the characteristics of space and the identity of the local community became a moral and political matter. The urban fabric, as it has been produced throughout its history, was given the prerogative of representing the identity of the city. In this way, the debate on the defence of historic centres became the debate for the defence of the “face” of the city (Giovannoni, 1931). This wide interpretation of environment went beyond the purely physical one to include the cultural and social ones. Thus, the urban designer expanded this technical competence to open up to comparison with the knowledge of social sciences and the history of the arts. This new approach is particularly evident in the design of some new neighbourhoods, such as the low-rise Tuscolano neighbourhood in Rome or the Matteotti neighbourhood in Terni.

Built at the beginning of the 1970s, the Matteotti neighbourhood is one of the first and most complete examples of social housing, in which the architect Giancarlo De Carlo joined the sociologist Domenico De Masi. Giancarlo De Carlo defined his work as an architecture of “participation” (De Carlo, 1981; De Carlo and Marini, 2013), in which he did not want to create an art work, but to integrate the users of the design process. The participation consisted in modelling the project on the guidelines provided by the future inhabitants: the workers of the steel plant. In particular, De Carlo defined a series of key elements: a clear separation of pedestrian paths from vehicular traffic, a composition of private and collective green areas, public services for the inhabitants and the surrounding areas; typologies with a clear and flexible organization, housing equipment based on the formation of fixed elements destined to facilitate the most elementary functions (De Carlo, 1977). From these principles, 15 different types of dwellings were created, varying in three further arrangements for a total of 45 solutions that represented a typological abacus of variations on a common scheme.

Five blocks were thus delineated, formed by different living cells that made up the framework of the neighbourhood (see Figure 6). Collective spaces, green areas, balconies, and pedestrian paths still represent the strength and reason for the satisfaction of the current inhabitants.

An important element in conceptualizing the built environment is the “unit,” as a result of the coordination of various interests, actors, and processes throughout time. The Matteotti neighbourhood tests an inclusive mechanism to conceive public and domestic space together with those who will live in, exactly as in a real community of which architects become part. This is an experimental way to provide designers with control of the forms of the built environment in coordination with those who will fill it in with their practices (Jones et al., 2005). Many of the conventional understandings of the spatial hierarchies associated with private, semi-public, and public spaces derive from the critical modernity applied to the urban environment to mass housing issues.



Figure 6 Matteotti neighbourhood (1969 – 1975), Terni
Source: Lanteri and Margaria, 2018.

3.4 The public dimension of urban centralities

Just beyond the Alps, in Italian-speaking Switzerland, Monte Carasso reveals a transformative urban model that leverages the public dimension of the intervention. Since 1979, this municipality has undergone a radical change, moving from being a small rural village, without any particular characteristics that would differentiate it from similar realities, to a place of social and cultural aggregation. The reasons for the success of this experience are to be found not only in the radical design proposals and the enthusiasm with which citizens have believed in an urban project, but also in relation to a growing territory and an enlightened local administration.

The proposal elaborated by Snozzi gave the small village an urban centre that it had never had, as well as a quality of architecture widespread and confident in modernity. The project led to the change of the existing urban planning tool and to the formulation of a new regulatory plan. The design concept aimed to build an urban centrality through the reuse of the convent and the involvement of the church and cemetery nearby. The exaltation of these three monumental elements allowed to generate a centre capable of arousing among the citizens a sense of belonging previously absent (Snozzi, 1995). With the renovation of the convent into a school from 1993, the interior space of the cloister began to be used not only as a school courtyard, but also a venue for many other collective activities. Observing this unexpected phenomenon, Snozzi recognized the urban value of this authentic public “piazza” and linked it with a small park to the south. The architect therefore proposed to build an extension of the school in front of the church, in order to keep the south side of the old cloister accessible. The new building further emphasized the idea of a square, as it provided compactness and a new view to the public space. Nowadays, every year, hundreds of foreign tourists visit the municipality and, in the summer, hundreds of students and young architects take part in the international planning seminar held by Snozzi since 1993 (see Figure 7). The correct application of building regulations means that the whole urban area, created year after year, is strongly characterized from a figurative and formal point of view. Here, there is a strong feeling of belonging to the place (Croset, 1996). Today, among the local population, there is a widespread opinion that Luigi Snozzi should be credited with having succeeded in giving a public dimension to all the interventions, both conceived for the community and designed for private individuals, creating an unicum at the service of man and the quality of life within the community (Bologna, 2014).

These considerations concerning Monte Carasso reinforce the

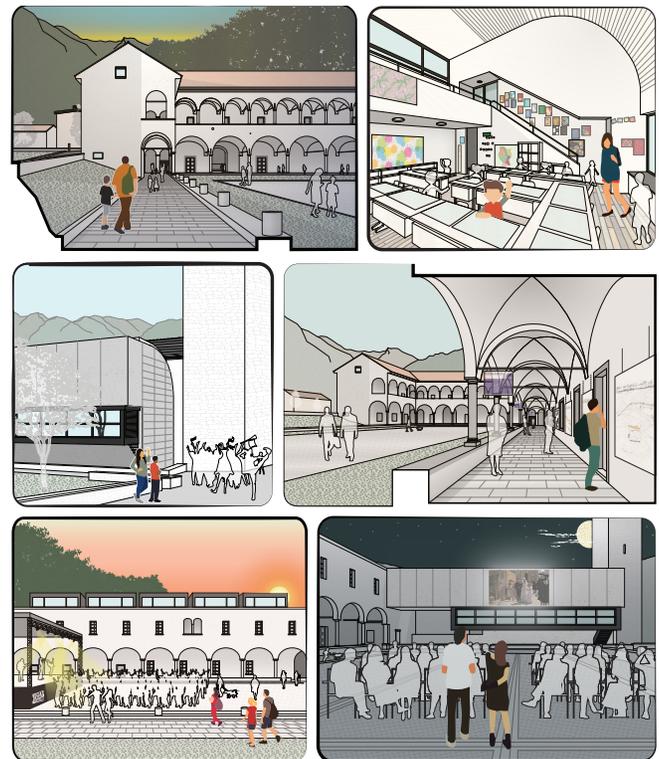


Figure 7 Story of urban daily life in Monte Carasso, Switzerland
Source: Forina, 2018.

principle that a historic centre is the ideal place for the protection of people’s traditions, since the active potential of local culture is deposited in it (Fano, 1974). In addition, the integration of modern architecture in an existing context and the quality of life of the individual within the building environment are two concepts that public opinion has been progressively educated in over the years.

4. Conclusion

Although analyzing two different urban contexts defined by their specific socio-spatial, cultural, political, and economic factors, this paper brings together the challenges in community building and place making faced by China, in its transitional period from a planned economy to a market economy, and Italy in the aftermath of WWII.

Analyzing the transition from the socialist to the post-socialist period, this paper shows how Chinese cities underwent significant change in terms of the composition of their socio-spatial fabric, serving the purpose of “production first, livelihood second” during the years of the planned economy, and then the consumerist

culture brought by the economic reform period. While the socially heterogeneous and self-sufficient nature of the previous danwei compounds was considerably dismantled in favour of residential segregation and anonymous “sealed residential quarters,” the wall persisted, remained, and became an eye-catching feature of a fragmented urban context marked by the socio-economic status of its residents. The need to overcome the independent nature of the danwei compounds led to the emergence of a new urban concept in China calling for urban projects to be carried out according to the logic of comprehensive development, looking at the city in its integrity and no more composed of single entities separated from the surrounding urban context. However, today the need to rediscover the relationship between community building and place making, after decades of economic reforms and fast urbanization, is pushing Chinese planners and architects to rediscover the human dimension of their cities, which was one of the main characteristics of the traditional urban fabric.

Facing different challenges in the post-war period, Italian architects and urban planners adopted sophisticated urban concepts to face the challenging issue of reconstruction after the war. The idea of the village-neighborhood, while focusing on the re-invention of traditional urban forms, created new urban experiences and design approaches reflecting the values and characters of the existing urban fabric. The humanistic dimension of industrialization, as a cultural process towards the establishment of a modern society, became one of the founding concepts in community building. Additionally, in order to preserve the character and identity of the city and that of the local communities, the built environment is now embraced in its integrity, as the result of physical, social, and spatial dimensions, and no more as the sum of single entities. Consequently, the public dimension and engagement of local communities as active actors in the shaping of their neighborhoods, the commitment of architects and enlightened local administrations, the application of urban notions reflective of communal values, and the recognition of the socio-spatial values of the urban fabric, are all mechanisms that become key to the success of many urban interventions in the post-war Italian context. ■

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Notes:

① The danwei, literally means “unit” and is generally referred to, in the West-

ern literature, as work-unit. The danwei represented the main place of employment in the People’s Republic of China prior to the economic reform, and it was for most urban residents the only means by which they could obtain employment (Wang, 2013). In this paper, the expressions danwei compound and work-unit are used interchangeably.

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