

New Domestic Rentscape  
A Critical Insight into Middle-class Housing

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ABSTRACT

Major Western cities are experiencing an increasingly unaffordable private rental market and the diffusion of the single person household as its typical dweller.

Since post-war times, the constant grow of rent prices did not match the stagnating trend of salaries. Already for Engels this was the inevitable trajectory of capitalist market economy, penalizing cash renters that have not found stability in the 70% majority of homeowners in Western democracies.

Looking at the long run of *modernization* as the history of *privatization*, it is possible to observe how the enclosures of land initiated in England in sixteenth century were coupled by a cultural process of individualization of the self –in terms of worship, labor, and quest for autonomous dwelling space.

This shift culminates in the modern industrial home, where a functionalized domestic sphere tends to separate places of privacy from the ones of social representation. For lower incomes this distinction collapses in the single room of the living-kitchen unit.

In order to combine the quest for privacy with necessary and optional collective spaces, several collective housing formats were conceived since the nineteenth century.

The hotel is the first housing typology and social technology conceived to host a community of *strangers*, capable to combine in a single building the generic space of the room with collective and public services.

In the late 1920s urbanists and thinkers as Hilberseimer and Teige already proposed hotel-like residential models as the most efficient housing form for a future egalitarian city. This would happen with the abolition of domestic unpaid labor through professional housekeeping, and the inclusion of services into the building.

In the digital era, co-living combines the principles of the hotel with the logics of sharing economy. Giving place to a hybrid model redefining the typical residential mixed-use building.

This dissertation aims to investigate the transformative potential of the existing residential Italian real estate, and its capability to absorb new collective housing models as co-living.

Banks, charities, insurances, and property companies rent thousands of units in Italian main cities, mainly located in central areas. Institutional landlords

played a key role during the twentieth Century in the simultaneous expansion of the middle-classes and the neighborhoods they inhabited.

Distributed in major Italian cities, and built between the 1920s and 1980s, these buildings share an *ordinary* character, as they were designed to embody the values of domestic comfort and self-representation of the modern European middle-class. The case studies considered are entire buildings owned by a single landlord –a rare feature in a private rental market almost monopolized by an archipelago of isolated individual-owned units.

Contemporary housing demand in Italy has radically changed from the previous generations both in socio-economic terms both in the cultural understanding of comfort.

Major socio-economic shifts contributed to distance potential tenants from the available stock, provoking a dual mismatch between demand and offer. Firstly, an overall aging population of 6,3 millions of over-65 individuals is currently living alone, often in a house of five or more rooms. Secondly, sixty-six percent of the population between 18 and 34 years old still lives with its parents.

If data and statistics suggest a mere quantitative solution –namely subdividing further the available stock– this research aims to investigate by means of architectural design and spatialization the effective potential of the Italian middle-class housing stock.

The hypothesis is that a set of stress tests of downsizing on the residential unit can raise several open-ended questions. As the architectural limits to flexibility, the financial limits to a 'micro-unit' housing stock, and the contested status of shared and collective space within the domestic.