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Transitional Spaces as a Domain for Public–Private Engagement in Urban Regeneration

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1 Introduction

This short contribution draws on work on an ongoing research project involving the Department of Architecture and Design (DAD) of Politecnico di Torino, in collaboration with the Municipality of Aosta, the Regional Residential Buildings Agency (ARER) of Valle D'Aosta and some project workers operating in the Valle D'Aosta region; already, in this first phase, on top of specific interest for the case study, it has enabled the advancement of some considerations of a more general type on a question which is met with increasing urgency in the contemporary city.

At the heart of this reflection, there is a possible link between the various buildings refurbishments (architectural, energy) of the existing residential heritage—particularly the public one—which at the moment can count on a particularly favorable combination of resources and implementation channels, and the parallel route of urban regeneration processes at the neighborhood scale, which seem to be capable of associating the physical refurbishment of spaces and built objects to the building or rebuilding of social practices in which the local community may recognize itself and feel adequately represented [1].

The architectural scale and the urban scale – although both supported by wide-ranging debates, vast literature, and rich records of studies – still too often tend to proceed on parallel lines and to communicate with difficulty. The causes of that can be understood in several ways: firstly, the funding lines and the promoters themselves often have different tendencies and approaches. Secondly, when considering the architectural and urban transformations together, a matter of threshold emerges: the theme of the boundaries (between public and private, but also between inside

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and outside, between the individual and the community) eludes the rigid schemes of the ordinary regeneration levers and requires the use of adequate tools – culturally even more than procedurally – to manage these transition spaces.

In a combination such as the current one, in which the refurbishment of the building's heritage is fully monopolized, even in strictly activating terms, by merely technical questions linked to the optimization and quantification of the performance of the building envelope, that we wish to turn our attention toward is, in other words, the necessity to steer these partial actions toward strategies of urban value, for at least two different reasons. First because, as has been long argued, urban regeneration remains, on the physical level, an operation of re-mixing, re-valuing, and "re-composition" of the existing city [2], which feeds on actions carried out primarily on the built heritage; second because some recent experiences, such as the EPOurban Project—financed by the Central Europe European Programme, which saw the participation among others of the municipality of Bolzano—have shown how the combined activations of tactical actions of energy retrofit and of strategic operations of urban refurbishment not only allow easier building of consensus and cohesion around the operations, but at the same time facilitate more efficient forms of alliance and cooperation between public and private subjects [3].

2 The *Cogne* Neighborhood

2.1 A Test Case for an idea of the development of Urban Mountain Areas

The case examined is the *Cogne Neighborhood* in Aosta, born as a workers' residential settlement to the west of the city center from 1918 onward, on the initiative of the steel company Cogne Acciai Speciali. It is a neighborhood that has seen, in the last decade especially, a progressive impoverishment of its qualitative standards, shown either in a generalized physical decay of public spaces and of some of the oldest buildings, or in the widespread appearance of a broad series of social difficulties, which have inevitably worked to reinforce and exacerbate some of the existing physical problems (Fig. 1).

With regard to this situation, already the subject of some recent interventions focused on the refurbishment of some heritage buildings, an important opportunity for intervention arose with the national Call for Proposals relating to the National Innovative Housing Quality Programme (PINQuA), introduced by the Finance Law 2020 and activated by a subsequent Interministerial Decree of the same year, the aims of which include "refurbishing and improving the heritage designated as social housing, regenerating the socioeconomic fabric, improving accessibility, the safety of places and the re-use of public buildings and spaces, as well as improving social cohesion and the quality of life of citizens, through a lens of sustainability and densification" (Interministerial Decree 395/2020, Preface). With this provision, later

Fig. 1 The new *Cogne Neighborhood* in 1930. (Cogne Archive - Regione Autonoma Valle d'Aosta)

merged with the more general stream of instruments activating the N.R.R.P., a budget line was activated totaling 853.81 million euros for 271 national projects for the refurbishment of the public housing heritage, of which the project presented here—edited in the form of a Technical-Economic Feasibility Project by the Aosta firm Atelier Projet, with the DAD as technical-scientific consultants—obtained a contribution of around 15 million Euros, currently based on the successive phases of design.

Notwithstanding its location in the city of Aosta, which possesses a fundamental link with the Alpine environment, the *Cogne Neighborhood* presents several characteristics that make it similar in some aspects to numerous other districts of the same type and era, and these characteristics are also present in environments that are not strictly Alpine. The regular urban texture, the types of multi-story in-line buildings often with distribution via a communal balcony, and the large public or semi-public open spaces are characteristics that may be widely met at the general level of the architecture of social housing in both the first and the second half of the twentieth century. From other points of view, besides, the settlement presents some original characteristics, linked either to the typology of the oldest buildings (*Stura-Filippini* and *Giacchetti* blocks) or, from a more urban point of view, to the extreme closeness to the city center and in particular to the area of the new headquarters of the University of Valle d'Aosta, which is investing resources very close to this area with a view to future expansion (Fig. 2).

One of the most interesting elements of this case study is, above all, what is today defined as "metromountain"– or metropolitan mountain – condition [4, 5]; this notion refers to the hybrid nature of a settlement fully inserted into the Alpine context which both participates in the physical and social dynamics of the mountain

Fig. 2 Aerial photograph of the *Cogne Neighborhood* of Aosta (2020)

milieu and thus is gifted with a certain sort of autonomy, and which is at the same time an eminently urban place, either for its urban characteristics or because of the presence of something that takes a supra-local value, such as the university. This particular condition allows us to question some firm assumptions, such as the worn-out urban/mountain division and to propose unhindered visions for the future of a settlement that is trying to find its own identity today.

2.2 A Strategy for Regeneration

The layout of the neighborhood, although extensively transformed over the course of time, is still clearly imposed on the grid defined by the initial project; successive phases of housing construction and transformation are however visible in the variations of the typological and morphological characteristics of the different zones. The first nucleus, on the eastern side, is built on the typological models of the open-courtyard block (Stura-Filippini and Giacchetti blocks) and the terraced house (Managers' Villas), which define a still essentially urban settlement model. The expansions on either side of the Second World War (Fresia Basse and Gazzera) in effect abandon the style of the courtyard block to take inspiration from the typology of in-line houses built in parallel rows oriented in a north-south direction; the fabric here gives place to the built and the public space loses the hierarchical connotations between the "inside" and the "outside" of the blocks, to become a substantially neutral substratum on which buildings rest. The construction of the last, western section (Fresia Alte and Nuova Stura) finally finishes the settlement in the same incremental style, leaving a substantially undefined open space on the street today called the Mont Fallère street.

The result today is a neighborhood still effectively legible on its original layout, which has however undergone notable transformations, including the building of

new connecting units between the north-south rows after the Second World War; the construction in the 1980s of a notably high residential tower block now due for demolition (renamed "skyscrapers" in the local vulgate) to the north of the Stura-Filippini block; some currently unusable underground parking spaces; several three- and four-story in-line buildings; and the completion of a few courtyard blocks. The substantially incremental and un-coordinated nature of these transformations, not only of the buildings component, but also of the open space, has resulted in the progressive loss of the architectural quality of the public spaces, which today have ended up fragmented, difficult to use, and in general very much run-down.

This progressive decay that has involved the neighborhood in the last decade is the result of a long-term process which has multiple social, procedural, and economic causes, and which currently affects a large community of inhabitants of that part of the city, who find themselves living through this increasing decay in the twin roles of citizens, as regard the impoverishment of public space, and of residents, as regard the obsolescence of the buildings.

The choice shared by the city of Aosta and the ARER has therefore led to the definition of a program based on two types of actions: first, an overall strategy for the whole neighborhood, aiming to reconnect the fragmented tissue of public space and to re-balance the use of open space in favor of pedestrians and cyclists; second a series of individual energy and typological refurbishment operations of some of the existing, no longer adequate buildings.

2.3 Neighborhood and City-Level Strategies

The unifying act of the project is the transformation of the central main street, Colonnello Alessi street. At the moment, the axis is not so perceived; the subtraction of significance and functions is the result of the cumulative factors of the settlement considered above, and of administrative and managerial incoherence that has produced very visible results. For example, in the place which could potentially be the hub of the neighborhood, Soldats de la Neige square, it has produced architectural barriers, enclosures, and precincts, even though they are used for public or community purposes such as schools.

The project affirms the value of continuity firstly of public space; connecting and distributive axes for functions, first occasional, later made continuous and communicating, such as schools, commerce, associations, and the headquarters of activities serving the community. The creation of a continuous axis for cyclists and pedestrians allows them to be placed in a relationship and also to perceive those functions not as separate and distinct but interrelated, an identifying network for the residents of an area, which, although next to the city center, is often perceived as separate and isolated. Moreover, the neighborhood is frequently perceived by the residents, but also by the rest of the citizens, as an entity split up into enclaves, each one gathered around characterizing ethnic, community, or social elements, but also perceived as isolating and a problem for the community and the city (Fig. 3).

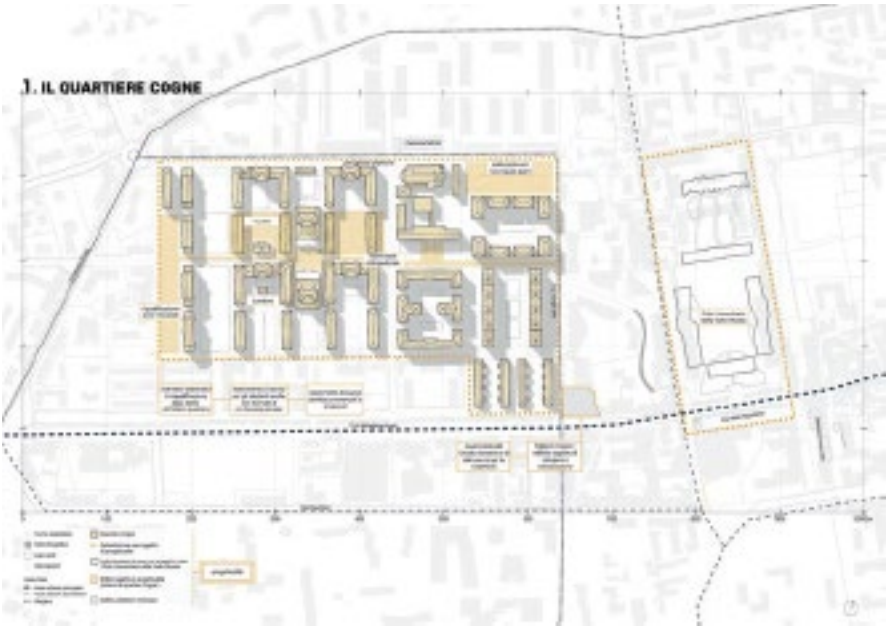

Fig. 3 Map of the interventions of the *Cogne Neighborhood*

The project affirms the value and the unifying function of this axis for the very life of the neighborhood, taking back ownership of public space, and giving cyclists and pedestrians priority over other traffic. These operations as a whole define a cyclist and pedestrian artery that will cross the neighborhood from east to west and allow it to be effectively connected with the city center and the new University site.

The axis will be largely freed of parking spaces, thanks partly to the availability of new parking places in the covered spaces in Liconi street, made available again by the project, through its updating to match the current regulations.

The unity of the connective public space is later shown through the morphology and material characteristics: absence of pavements, stone paving, level collection, and distribution of rainwater.

2.4 Individual Strategies

The gardens in Vuillerminaz street are today an important place of meeting and recreation for the whole neighborhood. Colonnello Alessi street, as a vehicular axis, in fact currently divides what could potentially be a single area into two spatially and functionally distinct zones: to the South a garden furnished with play equipment, games, and infrastructures for school-age and preschool children; to the North mainly designated as vegetation. The project intends to build a unitary dimension, updating the recreational functions, through more modern and attractive sports

equipment, diversifying the functions, including on a seasonal basis, to better designate the gardens for example as a base for "summer centers." Meanwhile, the redesign of currently broadly undifferentiated green spaces is exploited to create areas for rest and meeting, shown and characterized through the planting of new entities with the function of shelter and mitigation of the winter weather, through windbreaks, and the summer weather, through extra-shady zones.

The marketplace area, on the western border of the neighborhood, is currently given over to parking on asphalted surfaces, and 1 day per week it is used for a local market.

This area resists a compromise between the two functions, which has for years prevented the definition of an identity of its own either in terms of buildings or of public space. This outcome, today, reoccurs in many urban situations: an empty space that is listed halfway between a road distribution axis and a sort of linear piazza, of which, however, it possesses only the negative characteristics, in subtraction, but not the positive morphological properties and the necessary functional conditions to give it an identity.

The project starts with the definition of new paving, which aims to define two new clearly interpretable spatial modules: the divisions of the parking lots, and the partitions of the market stalls. In order to avoid interference between the design of the paving and the signage systems of the two functions, the project establishes three distinct textures with the help of easily recognizable materials: a first texture of order is constructed in stone stripes, to mark the sequence of the parking lots and the walking routes; a second texture is signaled in the ground through brass strips, inserted into the paving elements, to delimit the market stalls; and a third through brick paving, laid in such a way as to show the different usage designations of the boundary.

The demolition of the so-called "skyscrapers" at the corner of Elter street with Capitano Chamonin street finally frees up an area that the Administration intends to designate as public space, dedicated to the heritage of the workers' neighborhood and the work of the Cogne steelworks.

The project foresees several functions, shown through different typologies of surface organization: vegetation in tubs, to host shrubs and trees of low to medium height; grassed zones with reduced contributions of land for vegetation; paved areas. It is also planned to have a play area with play equipment for children, visually open to the surrounding seats. The surrounding areas offer a connected range of places for rest and socializing.

2.5 Refurbishment of the Fresia Buildings

The Fresia Buildings constitute the expansion toward the west during the period of post-war reconstruction, the in-line houses on the model of the external balcony access "case di ringhiera" of the workers' cities (Fresia Basse, 1942–46), in parallel lines of three stories with a north-south orientation.

The design for building refurbishment and town regeneration in the Fresia Buildings offers one interpretation of seamless transition between private, semi-private, semi-public, and public spaces. Continuous transition is shown in the urban section, where a sequence of designations may be seen:

- Private, balconies, and sunrooms
- Semi-private, staircases, and external corridors
- Semi-public, frontages, communal gardens, and community gardens
- Public, roads, pavements, hedges, green verges, green spaces.

The making of each space is defined through needs, which renders it unique and personal, a sign of functional and material diversification. The urban section illustrates the connections and the diversity of transition spaces, functional to the clarity of the designations and the management modes, followed through the search for spatial continuity.

3 Analysis of Transitional Spaces

Typological classification assists in the analysis of transitional spaces. The aim is the study of these spaces, which lies between the private dimension (dwelling, office or retail)—and the public one (street, neighborhood, city).

Categorizing spaces according to types has several aims, for example, research, regulations-norms, and design. Commonly, each purpose names its own types. On the other way, the structures and elements in their morphological- and temporal-evolution have been studied through the analysis of types.

A brief review of urban public space research through the lens of type suggests that researchers often focus on a particular type of space and that the types of interest to researchers and the perspective taken toward them have changed over time [6].

A more exhaustive and analytical study of transitional spaces is purposeful not just to research, but also to the aims of designers and of public bodies in charge of spatial planning and administration.

The value of categorizations lies in their classes, which should allow a clear reading of spaces. Preferably, categorizations should be mutually exclusive and simplify identification and the placing of space instances in the appropriate categories.

The comparative analysis of 11 cities conducted by Carmona et al. [7] showed that the classifications used for the management and long-term planning of public space had some common features but were not fully compatible. The common trait of the classifications studied by Carmona is based on the definitions of sizes and functions, not surprisingly, considering the main administrative function of these definitions.

Nearly all cities use public space typologies as part of their approach to public open space management, most often classifying spaces by size and function [7], by the following:

- Location according to their position in the city (i.e., Wellington's city open spaces, suburban open spaces, inner green belt, the bays, outer green belt)
- Environmental criteria and natural value/protection
- Potential uses as well as existing uses
- Ownership
- Relative protection from development
- Heritage value
- Management responsibility
- Professional responsibility (i.e., gardeners or foresters)
- Required maintenance approaches and tasks
- Special equipment requirements

Morphologically, transition spaces are made up of all those morphological varieties between street and home. The very nature of transition means that the description cannot refer only to the individual dwelling or group of dwellings, nor to the street or the surrounding area; it must rather include large-scale movements between the architectural and planning level. The study of transition spaces, therefore, poses an eminently interdisciplinary and multiscalar challenge. At the same time, the methods for their design and creation contribute to defining added value at both private and public levels; the effects are important both for the formal aspects and for the practices of daily life (Fig. 4).

4 Conclusion

The current project in the *Cogne Neighborhood* tackles the theme of public space from the interaction between a wide variety of spatial configurations, from those of social housing (block housing, terraced housing, and in-line housing) to those that are truly public. The ideal-typical figures of public and social life (the street, the

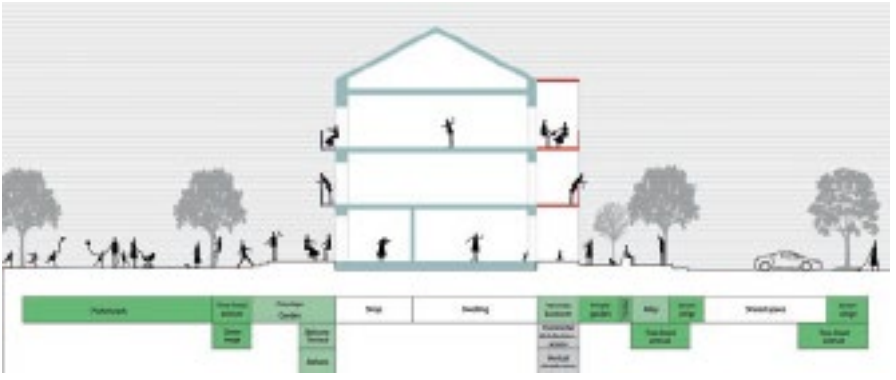

Fig. 4 Cross section of the refurbishment for the Fresia Buildings: continuity between private, semi-private or semi-public, and public space

piazza, the garden/ urban park) are in reality connected in a vast range of instances which urban design began to develop from the twentieth century onward [8].

The project takes as its objective an open and plural urban form, capable of linking a variety of conflicting and competing needs in Aosta's unique urban and social situation. The open nature of these spaces is translated into spaces for social connection and relationships, the intervention strategies considered above, at the neighborhood and city level and at the individual level.

What we briefly described is a very ambitious project, still under definition. Before the physical result of the transformation can be observed, it is undoubtedly too early to draw firm conclusions. At the same time, however, it is interesting to note how the strategy described above has built a discussion table which has been extremely effective in bringing the public administration and the various actors involved in the transformation into dialogue. The design of the Masterplan of the Cogne Neighborhood, understood as a tool which may be falsified, has allowed the raising of needs and the setting of objectives that otherwise would probably have remained unexpressed.

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