

Housing the student population in the post-industrial university city

Original

Housing the student population in the post-industrial university city / Mangione, Erica. - (2022 Oct 26), pp. 1-186.

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2973425 since: 2022-11-28T12:14:31Z

Publisher:

Politecnico di Torino

Published

DOI:

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Doctoral Dissertation

Housing the student population in the post-industrial university city

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October, 2022

Abstract

Universities have been traditionally considered as elite institutions, ivory towers which raised the urban ruling class. Nonetheless the situation changed rapidly in the last fifty years. The higher education is still encompassing a process of massification, with increasing number of global populations accessing the tertiary education and universities increasingly oriented to grow. Universities with their expansion in the urban environment became progressively urban actors, changing in some cases their role and activism in the local dimension. On the other side, cities start to notice university presence and particularly their student's urban activity. These dynamics involved also Italian universities and cities hosting universities. Here, in some cities more than others the university presence became crucial. Turin is one of the cases. Searching for a new identity in a phase of post-Fordist reconversion, in the late 90s the city started a process of reorientation of its economy. One of the main strategies went toward the development of a new image of knowledge city. In the meantime, several contextual as well as internal factor supported the mobility of a – apparently unstoppable – flux of student population in the city. As a result, Turin gained in the last twenty years one of the most numerous student population hosted by the main Italian cities. More than 114.000 students live daily the city of Turin, with more than one third residing for medium to long term in the city. The student demand for housing thus exploded in a few years, finding the local housing market unprepared. The affordable supply became rapidly insufficient while the private rental market have been overwhelmed by student request. This laid the foundation for a new market, those of purpose build student accommodations (PBSA). This student housing solution, though not really new for the Turin context, evolved to meet the demand. A private PBSA model which has been frequently reproduced mostly in the UK, America and Canada has recently approached the Italian market, finding a fertile environment in Turin and elsewhere. Following a in depth description of context specific characters of the case study of Turin, the research go on with the analysis of the process of expansion of the student housing supply, on the actors which make it possible and their reasons. But, most importantly looking at the urban socio spatial transformation that this process produced. The aim is in fact to understand how such transformations are produced and why. The focus is on students and their housing in the city as agent of socio-spatial urban transformations, with a particular attention to universities' influence on those

transformations, looking towards the most critical and those which potentially accentuate territorial fragilities.

The research work is articulated around three research questions.

1. Which local actors are involved and how in the urban development of Turin, as a city that aspires to become a 'university city'?

The first question raises from the need first to map actors and stakeholders, in order to assess how they are positioned in relation to the so-called University City strategy and the consequent increase of student population in Turin. Actors at play are those involved in either drawing, carrying out or in taking advantage of the Turin University City strategy, particularly on student housing development. At the same time with an inclusive approach oriented as well to the recognition of those who are not involved or even excluded from the processes at stake. The structure of the network of actors and their role are observed focusing on their interaction with the urban development; this also mean to evaluate actors' contribution to the city transformations in the socio spatial domain.

2. What impacts does the student residential sector have on urban socio spatial dimension?

The urban development of the 'university city' and actors' contribution are assessed through the analysis of the subsector of the student housing. The second research question points towards a better understanding of the role of student housing in the definition of socio-spatial urban transformations. The objective here is to draw the Turin student housing system in its complex geographies and multiple forms (also referring to the different housing typologies it entails). Quantify demand and supply is an intermediate objective in order to evaluate the extent of this relatively new urban phenomenon and estimate the scope of its impacts in the city. Furthermore, map the changing distribution of student residents allows to postulate on the fluidity and rapidity of the student housing market, as well as on the presence of student enclaves; evaluate the contribution of students as an agent of redevelopment of urban " voids ".

3. Which conditions (political, economic, physical, social...) support or accelerate the creation of exclusive urban transformations of the university city, particularly in the housing dimension, and how?

The third research question shifts the focus to local policies and their exclusive (or inclusive) outcomes. The aim is to make to emerge the contextual factors (political, economic, social etc.) influencing actors' agency and, consequently, shaping the student housing solutions. Effectively, this means first to reconstruct the process through which the policy responses (and non-responses) to the increasing university student housing demand have been shaped in Turin, assessing their socio spatial impacts afterwards. Put it differently, what step in the process, or reason of the actors, or contextual factor brings to student housing solutions potentially exclusive for the urban populations?

Table of contents

Abstract	2
Table of contents	5
List of Figures	9
Part 1 – Introduction	11
0.1 Issues at stake	11
0.2 The case study	14
0.3 Research objectives and approaches	16
0.4 Research contribution	21
0.5 Overview of the analysis conducted, approach and methods	23
Part 2 – Universities, students and the city	28
Chapter 1 - Universities in cities	28
1.1 The higher education as a global and mass phenomenon	28
1.2 Universities as key players in the knowledge economy	31
1.3 The relationship between universities and their territories	34
1.3.1 University impact in the urban	36
Chapter 2 - The student population	41
2.1 Student mobilities	41
2.1.1 Reading student presence in cities through the lenses of mobility studies	41
2.1.2 Student mobility between opportunity and possibility	43
2.2 The various representations of students as urban agents	45
2.3 Studentification	47
2.3.1 Students as gentrifiers	47
2.3.2 Reduce studentification impacts and de-studentification	48

2.3.3 Alternative interpretations of studentification processes	48
2.3.4 Studentification beyond students	49
2.4 Students as an urban population and citizens	51
2.4.1 Why and how to use the category of urban population referred to students	52
Chapter 3 - Student housing	56
3.1 Student housing typologies: context specific and global trend	59
3.1.1 The housing condition of students in Europe	61
3.2 The student housing market	63
3.3 Student vs non-student: housing path and conflicting demand	64
Part 3 - The case study	66
Chapter 4 - Turin	66
4.1 The spatial dimension	69
4.1.1 The urban spatial planning	69
4.1.2 The urban plan revision and the raising interest for the student population	71
4.2 The political context	72
4.2.1 A twenty-year strategy for the university city and housing	73
4.3 The university system	74
4.4 The student population	77
4.4.1 Student spatial distribution in Turin	77
4.4.2 Growing enrolments and students' origin	81
4.4.3 Turin gain students from south-north mobility	86
4.5 Student housing: Turin position in the Italian context	87
4.5.1 The institutional framework of student housing	87
4.5.2 The student rental and PBSA market	89
4.5.3 How the local market react to students	91
4.5.4 An innovative approach to affordable student housing demand in Turin	92
4.5.5 Insights on the student housing experience and living condition	93
4.6 Pandemic: implications and new scenarios	95

Part 4 – Housing the students: processes, policies and emerging geographies	97
Chapter 5 - Policy initiatives for the 'university city'	99
5.1 Approaching the analysis of a quasi- policy	99
5.2 - The actors and their positioning throughout the Turin university city	104
5.2.1 - Changing local policy priorities towards knowledge-based development	104
5.2.2 The changing role of university in Turin	105
5.2.3 The role of the City	107
Chapter 6 - Student housing: a key sub-sector in the urban re-development strategies	116
6.1 Mapping the student housing constellation: the supply	117
6.1.1 The supply in the private rental sector	118
6.1.2 The supply of PBSA	121
6.2 Affordable student housing: demand and sporadic reply	126
6.2.1 Students' political engagement	128
Part 5 - Discussion of results	130
Chapter 7 - Student and university led socio-spatial urban transformations	130
7.1 Studentification in Turin?	130
7.2 The emerging new role (and responsibility) of HEIs in Turin	131
7.3 Student housing development in Turin: building exclusive geographies?	132
Chapter 8 - Reshape the image of student population	135
8.1 Student population between diversification and individualisation	135
8.2 The non-student part of the housing and emerging pathways of exclusion	137
Chapter 9 - A quasi-policy for student housing	140
Chapter 10 - Conclusions	143
10.1 Universities and their partial engagement	143
10.2 Students role between perception and activism	144
10.3 A city committed to universities	145

10.4 Housing the students in Turin, at the crossroad of global phenomena manifestation
and urban changing geography 146

References 149

Annex 175

Annex 1 – Timeline of policy events and main urban transformations 176

Annex 2 – Main resolution and acts of the Turin Municipality 177

Part 1 – Introduction

This doctoral research addresses the role of tertiary education and the increasing focus on its growing student population in the dynamics of urban transformation, in this case explored from a preferred perspective: student housing as a potential urban policy issue. In this context students' presence is crucial because of the new issues it raises for urban governance in managing students' impact. Indeed, there is a problematic dimension to these impacts at stake, namely the local conflicts and forms of social exclusion they can generate.

On the one hand, the action of the student population on cities is seen in relation to the global dynamics of massification of tertiary education and increasing mobility of people. On the other hand, it does not prevent us from pursuing the objective of highlighting the way in which these dynamics are translated at the urban scale, in a specific context and through specific practices. In particular, in the local dimension, the effects of the presence of students are observed (1) on socio-spatial transformations and the possible conflicts associated with them, and (2) on local policies and actors who are involved in various ways in shaping urban development. The development of the themes described above takes place in this research through the in-depth study of a Southern European case study: that of the city of Turin, the former FIAT one-company-town in Italy. As will be recounted later, the choice of the city is not random but the result of the observation of the occurrence, precisely in Turin, of phenomena of urban transformation. These changes occur at times silently and inconspicuously, but at the same time reproduce dynamics and power games already observed elsewhere and critical to the life of the city. The final intention is therefore to gain a deep understanding of what is happening here and now, in order to highlight the nuances that are less evident, but which demonstrate a structural change whose implications are largely yet to be understood.

[...]