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# The re-codified town.

## Public space and “utopian pragmatism”

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*ABSTRACT. European towns are going through their umpteenth and uncertain structural phase intertwining, with unpredictable outcomes, with scenarios of economic recession and crisis in life-style models. 'Town recoding' indicates the set of actions aimed at containing urban hypertrophy, while responding to the demand for housing, mobility and quality services at affordable costs. Many solutions from Urban Renewal– from densification to spacing and retrofitting – do not sufficiently consider the issues linked to the perception of (and demand for) urban safety and security. The creation of 'grey areas', at risk of degradation in residential districts and public spaces, may nullify the regeneration effects. From the 'Halensiedlung' (Bern, Atelier 5, 1950) – to the latest eco-villages and eco-districts, the realization of 'happy degrowth' is taking shape, with anti-global features. Similarly, a great deal of Co-Housing initiatives applies a sort of “on-demand” neighbourhood, de facto scarcely “inclusive”.*

*KEYWORDS: Town re-coding, Gartenstadt, Halensiedlung-Bern, Auto-frei Siedlung, München-Riem, Grey areas.*

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## 1. Introduction

European towns are going through their umpteenth and uncertain structural phase intertwining, with unpredictable outcomes, with scenarios of economic recession and crisis in life-style models. 'Town recoding' indicates the set of actions aimed at containing urban hypertrophy, while responding to the demand for housing, mobility and quality services at affordable costs. It is a kind of process that requires a step forward to a change in mentality, ahead of a change in scenarios and strategies, so to modify the perception of value and opportunities which are built in the corpus of contemporary towns.

The re-creational hypothesis often starts from clamorous planning 'failures'. Interventions of Urban Renewal in suburban districts and satellite cities provide corrective actions although still weak. One of the most critical aspects of urban peripheries and new settlements of Social Housing is the risk that such areas may become tanks/theatres of social conflicts (Paris Banlieux 2005, London 2011).

Such risk becomes even more probable in the management phase of public spaces and in residential areas as to the possibility of establishing neighbourhood relationships and aggregation hubs. Many solutions – from densification to spacing and retrofitting – do not sufficiently consider the issues linked to the perception of (and demand for) urban safety and security. The creation of *grey areas*, at risk of degradation in residential districts and public spaces, may nullify the regeneration effects. Hence, the success of so-called 'alternative' districts, which refer explicitly to the principles of 'urban innovation' based on utopian and reformist premises. From the well-known *Halensiedlung* (Bern, *Atelier 5*, 1955-'61) – to the latest eco-villages and eco-districts, the realization of 'happy de-growth' (Latouche, 2006) is taking shape, with anti-global features. Similarly, a great deal of Co-Housing initiatives applies a sort of 'on-demand neighbourhood', de facto scarcely 'inclusive'.

### 1. The Bernese experiment. An 'ex post' verification.

The project – drafted by the young Bernese Atelier (1) in 1955 and finished in '61 – is the genuine translation of Le Corbusier theoretical principles, implemented with the proverbial Swiss precision and pragmatism. Fostered by the positive and open atmosphere of the Second World War the cornerstones of theoretical and formal reformist urbanism take root and grow in the Zurich Polytechnic, although updated and moderated in the most radical traits. It is interesting to note that the actors of the Swiss architectural scenario, who claim, almost without any exception, to follow *Le Corbusier*, although belonging to the third generation, have actually absorbed a plurality of inputs and visions. Students of *Hans Brechbühler* (1907-1989) – in his turn collaborator of the Maestro in the Parisian atelier – are not immune from the monumental fascinations of *Conservative Modernism* of which *Otto R. von Salvisberg* is certainly the finest exegete (Zbinden, Oechslin, 1991).

The young architects lived the years of the Swiss *Wirtschaftswunder*, grasping the opportunities but also feeling the weight of tensions and social contradictions that it entailed. Between 1945-'70, the Confederation's population increased dramatically – as a result of migratory flows, of one million units – heavily affecting society and cultural(2). In this turbulent atmosphere, the new housing requirements were likely to oppose and undermine the *pavillonnaire* and delocalization approaches, which until then had guided the urban development. The basic idea that guides the initiatives of *Atelier 5* is the construction of quality housing at affordable price: the design process can be likened to *ab avant la lettre* principle of *sustainability*. Hence the choice of maintaining a compact settlement, in a sort of horizontal *Unité d'habitation* that uses as much as possible the building potential of the site and

preserves the environmental quality untouched, by respecting the slope mass characters. The urban design also shows many similarities with Bern historical structure, characterized by serial patterns: multi-storey buildings, on gothic lot, arranged in parallel rows with service roads on the secondary front (fig.1a). The skyline overlooking the deep valley of the Aar is dominated by an uninterrupted and varied parade of facades and gables emerging from the gutter line.

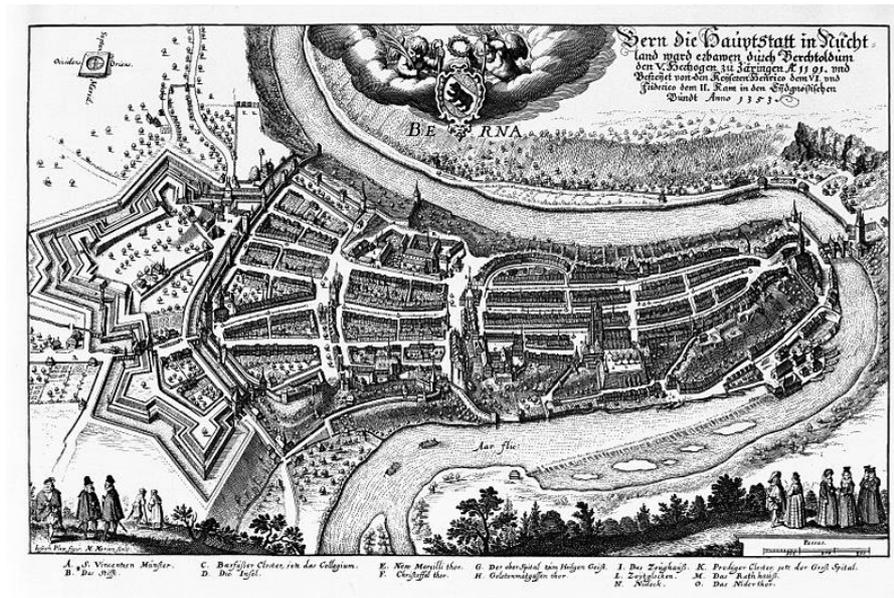


Fig.1a. - Matthaeus Merian, *Bern, map of the old City*, 1638 (source: *Flugbild der Schweizer Stadt*, 1963, Kümmerly & Frey, Geographischer Verlag, Bern).

### 1.1. Formal innovation does not mean 'social innovation'

Disproving a very widespread common place, in the design of *Halensiedlung* the architects of *Atelier 5*, starting from *Erwin Fritz* (1927-1992), coordinator, never thought of constructing a *new mankind*. The settlement built near *Herrenschwanden*, on the outskirts of Bern, cannot be defined *innovative*, in social terms. The building programme is not intended, in any way, to give life to alternative *communities*.

The purpose of the architects is simple and basic: it aims to give original shape and expression – with a formally “modern” project- to a well identified ‘*community of individuals*’. The ‘social pact’, whereby residents recognize themselves, is that of a high cultural level, lesser and middle class – where individual and collective domains must remain separate and distinguished. It is no coincidence therefore that designers observe the utmost care in sound-proofing both interiors and exteriors of the housing units (Scalbert, 2008, 14-25).

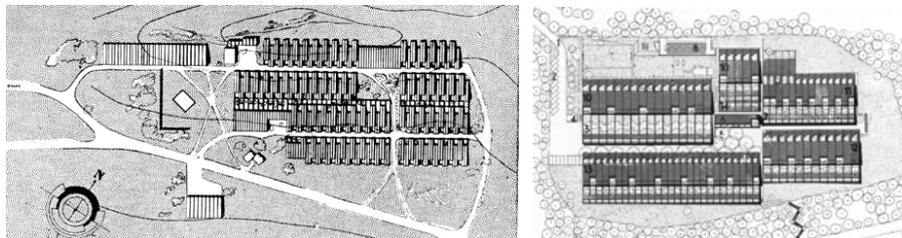
### 1.2. Calvinism and Pantheism

It is useful to recall that the logic which informs the project, truly expresses the Swiss Calvinistic spirit, being open to ideas and ‘cutting edge’ international contributions, although duly elaborated and formulated. This organic pantheism of

Rudolf Steiner matrix, loses every visionary or subversive attitude, to take on a "moderate" trait that is well expressed in the healthy motto of '*vie en plein air!*'. Socialization issues – design of common spaces, roadway choices, land use, planning of public-private spaces – are faced with a serene pragmatism so authentically *Sachlich* (*objective*). It is an objective concept that stems from a *Zielarchitektur* as opposed to the expressionist excesses: it aims at answering (and meeting) the requirements of the client, with no self-consciousness or narcissism. This is certainly the distinctive character the "Community" takes on, although made up of architects, artists and intellectuals, it is not and does not wish to be *Bohème*, nor *Kommune* in ideological and cultural terms. Even less the plenitude of private property is put into question, with restrictions on individual powers. It is not surprising then that the experimental prototype built is the villa *Wünnewil-Flamatt 1* (1957-'58), which is the basic unit of the overall compound (Workshop 5, Hertzberger, 1986).

### 1.3. The 'Bern Charterhouse'

As already noted by scholars, the Siedlung is "more *bastide* than rural village" (Sherwood, 1978, 62-65). *Halen* can be considered *heterotypic* and allusive, always referring its origin to 'other' and 'reverse' experiences (Foucault, 1967). Therefore, there is no doubt that it has more similarities with serial unicellular systems than with rationalist *Terassenhausen*. The reference to Le Corbusier matrix is established and recognizable in the unaccomplished projects of *Cité de la Paix et du Pardon* in *Sainte Baume* (1948) (fig. 1b) and *Roq et Rob* – Roquebrune-Cap-Martin (1949), in France. In the Bernese Siedlung, the reality (or '*Quotidies*') is selected and filtered through the quasi-monastic isolation in the Selva '*Desertum*' Oberland (fig. 1c).



1.b, Le Corbusier, *Ville de la Paix et du Pardon, La Sainte Baume*, (1948), unrealized project [© Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris]; fig. 1c - Atelier 5, *Halensiedlung*, Herrenschwanden -Bern, 1955-'61. [©Atelier 5, Bern].

Similarly to what is prescribed in the *Regula Benedicti*, in residential units only intellectual or creative activities are performed, nor consumer goods are produced. Manual ability concerns, at best, the care of garden, kitchen garden or the *bricolage*.

Halen focal point is the central position of the *Dorfplatz*, a sort of open air *Coenobium*, where the quality of life is expressed in the care of offspring and friendly relationships is celebrated and ritualized (Samuel, 2003, pp. 217-227).

Communal facilities, not unlike the pre-war rationalist prototypes, are 'internal' and no-frills: a *Kindergarten*, a small store, restaurant, meeting room, laundry and boiler room. In this '*Paradis*' – as predicted by L.C. – the spirit, unnerved by the metropolitan life is regenerated with the practice of sports – there are a swimming

pool and playfield – healthy life, the habit of a light and informal sociability (barbecue grills and open spaces for parties and picnic on the lawn).

In the general layout of a project, common spaces are the opportunity for community life lived as an option, i.e., without supplementary constraints that exceed normal neighbourly relations.

Building units are shielded and arranged so as to reduce, or completely cancel, introspection. Visitors are allowed to discreetly peek outside the gates of the courts, deliberately left 'open'; in the *Siedlung* the flow of daily life is hinted at through the blurred outline of objects and people, designed by the large screened glazing that surround and protect the privacy of the *patio* (fig.2a,b).

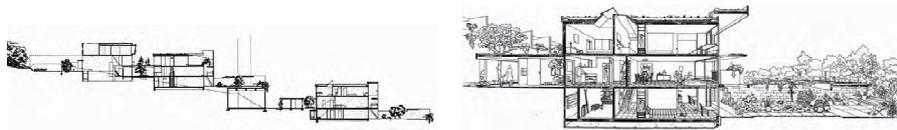


Fig. 2 a.b- *Atelier 5, Halensiedlung*, Herrenschwanden-Bern, Section. (1955-'61). [©Atelier 5, Bern].

#### 1.4. "High-density, low houses"

There is no doubt that these homes – identified from the typological point of view as 'Row house Terraces' – are actually 'juxtaposed villas'. The origin is the "typical 3-story dwelling used at Halen seems to be derived from the Citrohan houses of the 1920's, versions of which were built at Pessac in 1927" (Sherwood, 1978, 62-65). The apparent brevity of the language conceals an inner quality, refined and individualized: the use of *béton brut* is a formal choice more than a constructive requirement; thermo-acoustic insulation in fact, requires a very accurate final design, accompanied by the use of mixed precast blocks (*Durisol walls*, made from a mixture of wood fiber and concrete).

Inhabited by the same architects who designed it – the nature of *Halensiedlung* as the place of 'elective neighbourhood' actually already anticipates the issues and nodes, which characterize *Co-Housing today*.

Over time, the original, non *conformist attitude* of founders softened and diluted, fading to a more intimate and introverted approach. This trend is visible in the 'minimal' life that takes place during the day – the *Siedlung* is quiet and almost empty of its inhabitants – the square looks depressingly devoid of life since the kindergarten has been closed and the only store ceased its operations.

#### 1.5. Primary energy and sustainable mobility

Halen is one of the first European modern *Autofreisiedlungen*: the serene life of the *Dorf* is totally free of the risks of mechanized mobility (full limited traffic area in the *Siedlung* spaces). Sunny streets – whether called *carògi* or *gässchen*, *crêuze* and *laufstaege* – stairs and little squares, evoke an intimate atmosphere that already characterizes the historical centre of the federal capital. The connection between Halen and Bern – just 4.5 km from the centre – takes place in general by means of public transport. The bus stop is within easy walking distance.

In direct connection with the vehicle entrance to the neighbourhood, there is a covered parking lot whose upper pavement surface is main pedestrian route and village square. A gas station is available to residents.

In the near future, the general rehabilitation of the housing units will reduce the energy costs for heating. As far as private mobility is concerned, the use of renewable energy and car-sharing is encouraged.

### **1.6. Nature, Landscape, Freedom.**

In the *Siedlung* you eat and breathe in a healthy way, you do sports; leisure time is spent in a creative manner. The big difference with respect to a Fitness centre is the social type of recipients: not individuals, but households settled in a permanent stay, as outcome of a clear and shared way of life: 'in contact with nature'. This approach does not imply adherence to *Ruralism* typical of utopian and environmentalist communities: there is no idea of agricultural cultivation, nor any aesthetic approach. The garden unfolds into a *patio*, or along an extended segment with a maximum width of 3 or 4 meters. Freedom offered to residents lies in the perceptive transfer on an extraordinary beautiful landscape, extended to the forest and open on alpine ranges.

## **2. Socio-economic models, settlement outcomes**

Private property is not called into question in Halen; the house is an asset that is passed to future generations and the same internal layout of domestic spaces is designed to provide residents the utmost freedom and flexibility.

In law, 'public good' is conceptually distinct from 'collective good': the first in fact, can be used by the whole social body, the second is used by a well determined subgroup. According to this logic, it is natural that also the Bern *Siedlung* open space belongs to the category of services that are partially used by the outer world. Although no gate or barrier indicates bans or 'house rules', its exclusive use is well understood.

It is no coincidence that in German the term 'collective good' makes reference to the habit of *Gütergemeinschaft* [community property]. It is defined as "*solidarischen Gemeinschaft mit kollektivem Eigentum*" [supportive community with collective ownership]. The wording refers to an old and coded structure, which dates back to the Germanic Law: the so-called *Allemande*, common goods of a varied nature, referable to the mixed use of open spaces, vital (water) and natural resources for construction and fuel (Felber, 1900-'01). In an advanced form and with the remedies of modern law, they are all present in *Halen*, and create, and although not representing the precise quality, they are a distinguishing feature. The fundamental role, of solidarity and subsidiarity, seems anyhow absent or greatly attenuated (Sherwood, 1978, 62-65).

### **2.1. The role of public/private space**

In a settlement whose character is decidedly 'social' – fully consolidated and set in a historical context – the evaluation of 'success' is based on the consideration of its positive effects on the life of the community. For *Halen*, over and above its unquestionable formal quality, there is no lack of '*chiaroscuro*' effects: some critical issues emerge, more than a doubt on the actual effectiveness on the settlement device and its evolution, in terms of public space construction. A visit to *Siedlung* may strengthen the opposite impression, given the attention and control - discreet yet constant – that inhabitants have on any 'outsider'. This phenomenon is not unlike what can happen in a mountain village or a small suburb. The very presence of a foreigner, in the little square, appears contrived and incongruous. Contrary to the stereotypes transmitted by a kind of literary 'hagiography', reality is more complex and elusive: if on one hand, the attention designers paid to the needs of children and adolescents is unquestionable, on the other hand, this belongs to the past, seen the drastic reduction in number and complexification of households.

The creation of neighbourhood units, as determined by the topological nature of the site, brings us back to the close control of the Bernese *Höfe*. The Bernese compound, since its appearance, has experienced a quick and sustained critical acclaim, spreading rapidly all over Europe. In December 1961, Aldo Rossi, then editor of *Casabella*, highlighted the characters of novelty and formal living quality, while bringing them back to Le Corbusier parentage (fig.3).

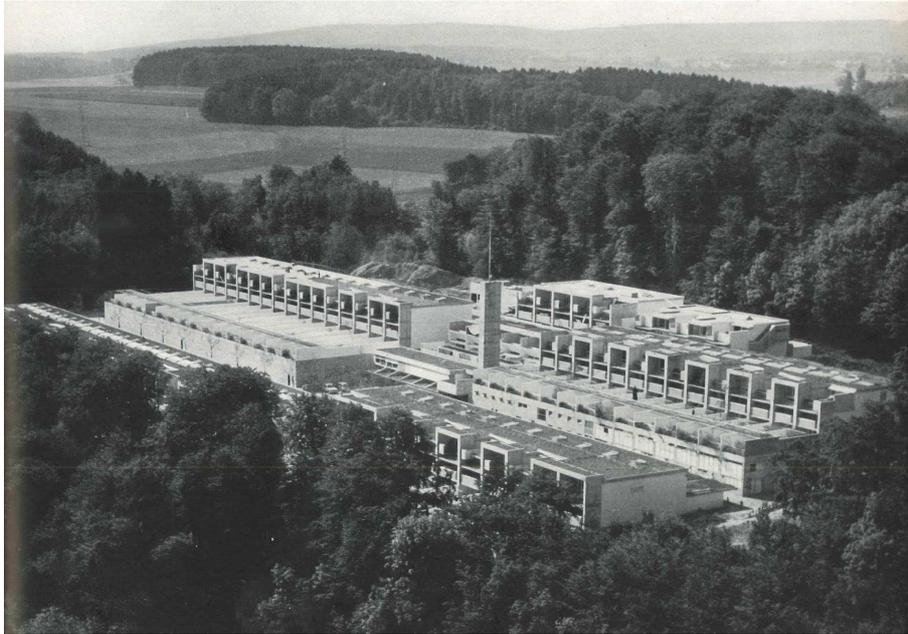


Fig.3. *Halensiedlung*, Herrenschwanden-Bern (1955-'61) [©from: *Casabella*, 1961].

There is no doubt that the Siedlung's clear and rigorous system – its compact, dry and *logic*, layout – permanently influenced thinking and architectural work. The media popularity of *Halen* reverberated in Europe and in particular in the Anglo-Saxon world, more open to transpose significances and values (2), as evidenced by the numerous quotes and publications in the most prestigious of architecture *Magazines* of the time.

## 2. Gender - Co-Housing – The Bavarian experiment

The ambitious “realized utopia” of the satellite city of *Messestadt-Riem* rises in the urban district of München-Riem. After twenty years of planning – with the construction of the fair & exhibition district, the urban park and the settlement of 12,858 inhabitants – the district itself can be considered now as completed (Hafner, Miosga, et al., 2007). *The Autofrei Siedlung* (Reichow, 1959), the settlements '*Familien- Kinderfreundlich*', although with a high housing standard, show their critical aspects right in the 'sensitive' use of public spaces. Evidence of that is provided also by various initiatives of social control and service 'de-localization'. The extensive dimension of the neighbourhood, subject to a continuous process of construction and densification, means that each general judgement appears into perspective and provisional. At present, with respect to the more consolidated housing sector, the 'House of Women' is one of the most interesting and successful



Fig. 4a,b- *FrauenWohnen München* , Messestadt-Riem, (Planungsgemeinschaft 'Zwischenräume', Munich) [©Wilma Scholly].

works. This is an experimental project, designed and self-managed by the *FrauenWohnen München* cooperative (4). The 'gender-based' use, as per the programme (but not only), is open to single mothers with young children, young and old single women, female homosexual couples (5).

The residential compound is composed of 49 housing units, arranged on three buildings, varying from two and five levels above ground: all the larger apartments are fitted with balconies or private gardens, overlooking the countryside. The apartments are served by generous size landings, whose continuity is interrupted by building details and lively arrangements of interior elevations.

The building was designed in compliance with passive house energy standards, controlled ventilation and micro-environmental control systems. The whole structure meets accessibility requirements for disadvantaged users and offers many services in common. The social room – with a terrace overlooking the courtyard – the guest house, a lounge in the basement, bike storage rooms, laundry and kitchen gardens make up a valuable space offer. There are several private rooms in the compound used for storage and underground parking (fig. 4,a,b).

Protection, fellow feeling, commonality of life, respect of the individual and uniqueness of characters, are implemented in the case of Munich, with a clear "courtyard" spatial configuration, realized by taking rural settlements as a model. Contrary to the examples of *cloisters*, the external appearance is open and friendly, and does not seem different from the medium-high level residential building that of the new, expanding districts of the Bavarian city (fig.5 -a,b).

### 2.1. The reasons for a success.

The housing compound was honoured with significant regional and national awards (6): there has been a unanimous call to the quality of the initiative promoted by the "association of a group of women gathered in a cooperative, animated by the wish to create a joint project, for the intergenerational communication" and able to determine the success of the initiative and its implementation "in an excellent manner". The Co-Housing project was also judged "exemplary in terms of organization, urban integration and functional aggregation, as well as sustainable from the economic and environmental point of view, design and energy saving". The innovative and exemplary value of this prototype has meant that a second compound is under construction in the area of *Munich-Westend* (7) as a recovery of an existing building.

### 2.2. Social innovation and re-coding of urban space

The survey of several large residential patterns of the past decades and some recent achievements is therefore useful to look back critically, the guidelines and trends of the Third Millennium's 'social town', in light of its transformations, and impending crises. After the collapse of socialism's totalizing ideologies, and illusions fed by the economic liberalism, basic social models have been suggested again, as having a 'utopian', 'alternative' (Kendall, 2008), or 'innovative' basis (Moulaert,

Vicari, 2009). They raise serious mortgages on the very notion of 'development', starting from the questioning of traditional social values.

In the current framework, the interpretation of *economic decline* as opportunity for the launching of '*décroissance sereine*' in the framework of a sustainable, economic, social and environmental system. It takes on a special meaning (8) (Latouche, 2006, 17). For this reason too, the changing conditions of global economies and demographic booming, lead us to rethink urban and housing phenomena in the light of new labour organization forms and in view of economic down turn of work, at least, as known until now (9).

*Re-coding* of public space starts from the observation and understanding that the idea of decay or well-being is influenced by prejudice but also by increased social conflicts and missing shared behavioural rules (Bauman, 2000).

In the absence of reliable settlement models and consistent institutional initiatives – it is up to spontaneous self-organization of homogeneous groups and stakeholders to take over and solve inadequacies generated by urban architecture and planning.

Architecture and town planning, given their structural slowness struggle to put themselves on the scene of changes occurred.

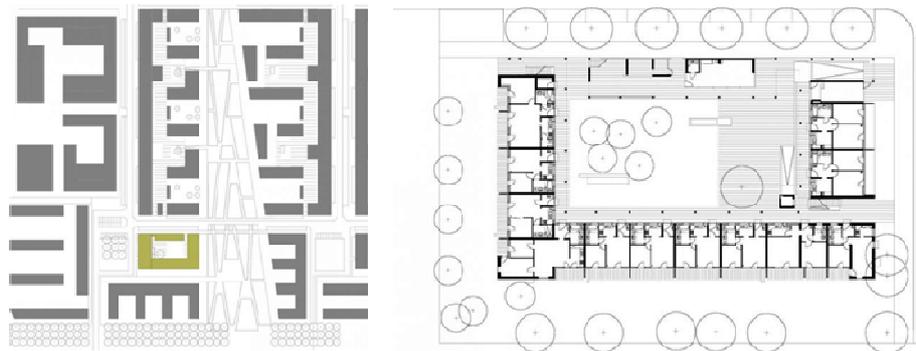


Fig. 5a,b- *FrauenWohnen München*, Messestadt-Riem, [© Planungsgemeinschaft 'Zwischenräume', Munich].

The debate on the new arrangements that it might take, is inevitably doomed to obsolescence and failure where innovation processes have not yet been started and consolidated.

A possible and feasible way can be covered, provided that internal disciplinary procedures are radically reformed, with a cultural and institutional process that in most Countries of Mediterranean Europe seems just started.

Permeability to multidisciplinary inputs of economy and social sciences, in the basic consideration of the role of spaces are the fundamental components for the restarting of urban fabric. The public and residential property shall incorporate the new instances, for example, responding to the fragmentation of traditional families and the needs of inclusion of 'new citizenships' (Maahsen-Milan, 2012).

The social re-housing process offers solutions for singles or extended families. The condition of accessibility and use of the solidarity and subsidiarity – in a framework of functional flexibility that meets the need for stability and security.

### 3. Conclusions: ambiguity of new paradigms.

The *Gartenstadt* paradigm shows all its limitations also in the creation of eco-districts. The re-coding of the values of the Mediterranean polis shows a historical example in which social cohesion, vitality of public spaces and environmental efficacy have confronted for centuries: urban design can overcome the "safety-security" duality by accepting that identity develops by slow stratifications and networking in which nodes, differences and paths take over an ever increasing value.

It is often spoken of the social co-habitation, in terms of *Neue Nachbarschaft*, [*New Neighbourhood*] as desire to share common parts and services vis à vis market conditions that make the 'right to housing', actually inaccessible (Manzini, 2010, 100-105).

At the same time, this option allows living in a dimension that is less lonely and anonymous, certainly safer, than actually propose suburbs or urban neighbourhoods of single-family housing. The down side is the risk of a 'sterilization' of the neighbourhood to minorities or vulnerable social groups, or the expulsion of all the craft-production or business establishments - shops, dining and entertainment - which, by their nature attract the most diverse and *uncontrollable humanity*. The node of *social innovation* and *social spaces* in which it manifests itself, is far from being resolved.

#### Notes

- (1) Formed by Edwin Fritz, Rolf Hesterberg, Samuel Gerber, Hans Hostettler, and Alfredo Pini (hence the name A-5).
- (2) Tensions it produces are profound and enduring, bringing about rejection and closure reactions towards '*Gast- Saisonarbeiter*' from Southern Europe and Germany, quickly urbanized in the poorest neighbourhoods of the town. Car. Steinert, Johannes-Dieter, *Migration und Politik. Westdeutschland - Europa - Übersee 1945-1961. Kommunikation und Gestaltung*, Osnabrück, 1995
- (3) The London Borough Camden, designed by Sidney Cook (1910-1979), in the years 1965-'73 (Swenarton, 2011), *Fleet Road Terrace Housing* (project from Neave Brown, 1967), and overseas - by the early 1970's by the York Urban Development Corporation (*Elm Street, Ithaca, NY*, project from Werner Seligman) and *Flemingdon Park*, Toronto, on a drawing by Irving Grossman - echo and declination in terms of experimental Social Housing so. In: SHERWOOD, Roger, 1978, pp. 62-65.
- (4) The project was carried out on a drawing by: Planungsgemeinschaft 'Zwischenräume', München (Brigitte Henning, Mechthild Siedenburg, Roswitha Näbauer, Lurildo Meneses Silva); environmental project: ARGE Widmer-Thiel +Zacharias, München.
- (5) Anita-Augspurg-Preis (2007); Bayerischer Wohnungsbaupreis (2007); Deutscher Bauherrenpreis (2008).
- (6) "The project's aim is to ensure home as a fundamental right for women of all ages in Munich - Bavaria, guaranteeing quality and ownership. [...]. The objective is to provide independent accommodation to empowered women".
- (7) "This is a proposal needed to reopen the space of inventiveness and creativity of the imagination, blocked by economic, developmental and progressive totalitarianism". In Latouche, Serge. 2006, p.17.
- (8) [http://www.frauenwohnprojekte.de/index.php?id=6&no\\_cache=1&tx\\_p2fwp\\_pi1\[showUid\]=16](http://www.frauenwohnprojekte.de/index.php?id=6&no_cache=1&tx_p2fwp_pi1[showUid]=16)
- (9) The creation of a reconciliation culture with the requirements of parental management is expressed in the design and implementation of the 'Family audit process' as promoted by the Autonomous Province of Trento and Bolzano.

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### **Biography**

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