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Reconstructing Italy

The Ina-Casa Neighborhoods of the Postwar Era

Stephanie Zeier Pilat

Studies in Architecture

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Stephanie Zeier Pilat
University of Oklahoma, USA

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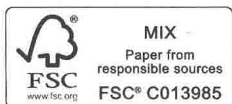

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Foreword

Robert Fishman

The history of social housing is a strange field: the failures are renowned, and the successes forgotten. There is no more famous image in all of 20th century architecture than the 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, the event Charles Jencks immortalized as "the moment modern architecture died."[1] The twin peaks of American urban thought—Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) and Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* (1974)—similarly center on the destructive consequences of American urban renewal and their dire implications for urbanism.

Nor have the failures of European social housing been neglected. The shortcomings of the Parisian *banlieue* have been extensively chronicled, from the inhuman scale and standardization of the 1950s high-rise *grands ensembles* to the current isolation and rebellions of the immigrants who now inhabit them. The melancholy declension of the Swedish New Towns, once the vanguard of progressive social housing, is the subject of Peter Hall's profound reflections in *Cities in Civilization* on how the bureaucratic imperative of quantity ultimately defeated design quality. And Rem Koolhaas has devoted an influential chapter in *S, M, L, XL* to the failures of Bijlmermeer, the massive Dutch social housing project outside Amsterdam that he descries as "boredom on a heroic scale."[2]

By contrast, this remarkable book is the first in English, and among a very small number in Italian, that analyzes at length what is arguably *the* great and lasting success of post-1945 social housing: the Italian Ina-Casa program. ["Ina" is the abbreviation for the Italian national insurance agency that financed the houses.] Between 1949 and 1963 this government agency built over 350,000 units in a nation struggling to overcome the terrible burdens of war, fascism, underdevelopment and poverty. More importantly, Ina-Casa built real communities based on a solid foundation of communitarian social policy and outstanding architecture and urban design. The design achievements analyzed in this book were truly a collective effort, in which social policy was sensitively interpreted by teams of architects responsive to local needs and context.

Yet Ina-Casa is virtually unknown even to specialists in social housing. I don't expect that, for example, the complex townscapes of such Ina-Casa projects discussed in this book as Tiburtino in Rome or Borgo Panigale in Bologna will ever displace in our architecture textbooks the images of the Pruitt-Igoe towers being dynamited. But this book should provoke some necessary re-thinking of conventional wisdom about postwar social housing.

Pilat leads us to reconsider not only the history of social housing, but also the history of another neglected success—the post-1945 Italian recovery. As Alexander Stille has recently observed, "After World War II Italy achieved a degree of shared prosperity that was unprecedented in its history, allowing the country to enjoy both a high material standard of living and a great deal of security (job protections, generous unemployment benefits, and free health care and education), while leaving intact many idiosyncratic yet often inefficient national habits and institutions ..."[3]

Ina-Casa was, in a sense, one of these "idiosyncracies," a uniquely Italian response to the broader housing crisis that gripped all the Western nations after the Second World War. This crisis had been building since the First World War when systematic inflation undermined any incentive for capitalist developers to invest long-term in rental housing for the working- and lower-middle-classes. Any comprehensive solution required a new relationship between housing and the state, because only the state could provide, either directly or through mortgage guarantees, the long-term capital that a mass housing program requires. Weimar Germany in the 1920s and the American New Deal and Swedish "People's Home" movement in the 1930s took the first steps toward such a solution. But, overall, the housing crisis festered through the Great Depression and the outright destruction of the war years. Every nation, even the United States, entered the postwar world with massive housing deficiencies, made worse by the mass migrations from a depopulating countryside to overcrowded cities. A "revolution of rising expectations" meant that the terrible slum conditions inherited from the nineteenth century could no longer be tolerated.

As early as 1923, Le Corbusier had summed up this seemingly-permanent housing crisis under the slogan, "Architecture or Revolution," that is, only modern architecture with its efficient industrial methods could enable capitalist societies to meet the basic social needs of the masses and thus avoid violent revolution. In the post-1945 years the urgency of the housing problem did indeed galvanize elites to responses along the lines that Le Corbusier himself first suggested in the 1920s: the industrialization and standardization of housing design and production to yield quickly the necessary quantity of housing units. This flood of new post-1945 housing took a characteristic form in most countries, shaped by design, construction and bureaucratic imperatives. In Sweden, for example, the state borrowed long-term capital which it loaned at low interest rates to building cooperatives for large-scale rental tower blocks and garden apartments clustered close to rail lines—the formula for the Swedish New Towns and later the French grands ensembles.

As Peter Hall has shown for Sweden and Norma Evenson for France, the overriding need for speed, economy and quantity led to Koolhaas's "boredom on

a heroic scale:" the simplification of Le Corbusier's archetypal towers-in-the-park to massive, repetitive tower-blocks in placeless settlements built on cheap land at the edge of the metropolitan region. This social housing indeed responded "heroically" to an urgent need, but the settlements were unloved and unlovable; eventually they were deserted by the more prosperous Europeans and inherited by immigrants who could afford nothing better.

Only two Western democracies avoided this trajectory: the United States and Italy. In America "social housing" took two very different forms. The low-rent program known as "public housing" as provided in the 1949 Housing Act was built as European-style rental towers in the northern industrial cities. Pruitt-Igoe and similar projects were limited to the poor—and soon occupied overwhelmingly by poor black migrants from the rural South—and thus were located in the black ghettoes of the inner city. This extreme racial segregation within deindustrializing cities meant that American "public housing" managed to be an even worse failure than the worst European social housing. Meanwhile, the 1949 Housing Act also reinvigorated a New Deal innovation: federal mortgage guarantees that enabled the white working-class and lower-middle-class to afford mass-produced tract houses in the suburbs. Levittown, Long Island, and its many successors preserved the outward form of the single-family detached house and private ownership while allowing for the mass-production techniques and government-led financing that also characterized European social housing.

Italy took its own "idiosyncratic" path that, as Pilat shows, more closely resembles the communitarian emphasis of northern European social housing while somehow avoiding the brutal scale and monotony that ultimately undermined so many other social housing programs. How the Italians achieved this remarkable balance is the main theme of this remarkable book, and Pilat's close analysis repays careful reading. I will only mention briefly some factors that seem to me to be most significant.

Pilat rightly emphasizes the uniquely Italian political framework in which Ina-Casa flourished. For Ina-Casa was not a program that a militant Left imposed on the Center-Right Christian-Democratic coalition that governed Italy in the postwar years. Instead, it was very much a project of that conservative coalition, championed by Minister of Labor and later Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani. Fanfani and his party wanted to emphasize traditional values of home, community, and ownership, and were correspondingly suspicious of quick, cost-effective radical solutions that housing bureaucracies were able to impose in other countries. Residents, moreover, were expected to purchase their homes through state-guaranteed mortgages at favorable terms, thus combining social design with the kind of pride-of-ownership of the American tract suburbs. Finally, as Minister of Labor, Fanfani was able to define Ina-Casa as primarily a *jobs program*, thus turning its "inefficiencies" into virtues.

But if the politicians provided a promising context, this book is ultimately the story of a remarkable collective effort by a gifted set of postwar Italian architects who somehow found the right blend of organization and creative freedom. Pilat is at her best in presenting the complex organization of Ina-Casa that yielded a

high level of design in all the projects while allowing a wide variety of responses to local context and topography. As she shows, Italian Fascism had inoculated Italian architects against any temptation to worship top-down control and machine-inspired standardization. They were similarly suspicious of the inflated scale and stripped-down functionalism that characterized so much of the modern movement of their time. Long before Charles Jenck's supposed post-modern moment in the 1970s, the Ina-Casa architects were attentive to historic context, urbanity, and complexity in plan and elevation. So, alone among the postwar mass housing programs, Ina-Casa was able to incorporate such virtues as variety, public space, and craftsmanship into the very essence of the designs.

Today, as Pilat shows, the Ina-Casa projects have aged so successfully that they are not perceived by their residents as "social housing" at all. Nevertheless, Ina-Casa should have a vital place in our larger understanding of the history of modern housing, and this book is particularly timely now. The prevailing neo-liberalism in both Europe and the United States has managed very effectively to negate the ideal of housing as a social commitment and to substitute "the housing market" for "social housing." But the market itself, so beloved of the neo-liberals, has had its revenge. The attempt to make housing a global "profit-center" for massive flows of unregulated capital seeking maximum returns led first to a series of housing bubbles and then to the disastrous crash of 2008 that almost wrecked the world economy and still prevents recovery.

In this context, Ina-Casa emerges in this book as a vital alternative to the failed bureaucratization and standardization of most postwar government-built housing, as well as to the market failures of our own time. These designs emerge as important inspirations for a genuine *social* housing movement; they have proven their strength and resilience over half a century. This book is thus both a challenge to the received history of social housing and a vital resource for its future.

ENDNOTES

1 Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 9.

2 Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, Jennifer Sigler, Hans Werlemann, *Office for Metropolitan Architecture, S, M, L, XL* (New York, NY: Monacelli Press, 1998), 871.

3 Alexander Stille, "Italy under a microscope" [review of John Thavis, *The Vatican Diaries* and Tim Parks, *Italian Ways: on and off the rails from Milan to Palermo*], New York Review of Books (December 5, 2013), vol. 60 #19.

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