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Popular Strategies in the Historic Urban Centers

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Introduction

by Cesare Ottolini

Case studies texts

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Popular strategies against evictions and displacements in historic urban centres*

The roots of the urban exclusion

The social involvement and its dimension as result from the transforming changes of the towns, is an aspect that can no longer be ignored.

Housing access has turned to be a problem for many social categories.

World-wide economical interests and the growing discrepancy between social needs and economics are affecting all levels of society, but particularly the local level, where it is possible to verify a new exclusion form: the urban displacement.

Historic towns, especially the European ones, and more precisely the historic urban centres, are emptied out of their inhabitants, sometimes in a quick and violent manner. The sudden rise of rents and building/estates speculation force the tenants to surrender and give up, often through eviction, their houses, their neighbourhoods and their usual environment. Then, it seems that the town centres where the social-economical pressure is high become a real centrifugal force, the victims of which are those residents and citizens belonging to popular working classes.

Several studies and reports about the problem of towns transformation, are available.

Nevertheless, these research projects often lie dead in some drawer and even if or when they are utilized to elaborate the integration policies, they show very little correlation with the concerned subjects.

Actually, a true systematic way to collect and display the available data, does not exist nor is there an utilization of the accumulated experiences coming from the various international partners, particularly from the European Union countries.

The fragmentation and scattering of this knowledge negatively affect the associations and the subjects involved in the urban problem, since they must face the challenge of how to overcome the displacements struggle every time.

Habitat Agenda, historic urban centres, inhabitants participation, world-wide economic process, and....

Several analyses, as well as this research, reveal that the courses of urban displacement are more and more under the urge of the world economical trends, which at local level generate segregation and space allotment among the various social categories.

New demands arise and more and more new strategies are required.

Will the new European impulse, owing to the Amsterdam Treaty, be able to offer new tracks to fight this kind of exclusion?

Moreover, will the things improve, if the political power will widen the expression borders and if it will trust the subjects involved in these problems?

And after all, what will be the role played by Habitat Agenda?

* *by Cesare Ottolini*

With regard to this point it is indispensable to remember that 171 countries, all the European ones included, have approved Habitat Agenda, in the course of Habitat II, binding themselves to its fulfilment.

There are 79 commitments and 620 recommendations which bind all social partners, particularly the governments, to work out and enforce the National Plans of Action to accomplish the task and reach the goal for adequate housings for everyone and for sustainable towns.

The following articles from Habitat Agenda regard the issues discussed in this research:

- Acknowledgement of the right to housing: art. 26
- Defence of the historic towns patrimony: art. 30, art. 39, art. 40, art. 43 c), art. 45 m), art. 68, art. 90 e), art. 108, art. 152, art. 153, art. 154, art. 154 f)
- Displacements and evictions: art. 30, art. 40, art.55, art. 95, art. 119
- Problems linked to wars and to natural calamities: art. 64, art. 174, art. 176, art.202 g), art. 204 g).
- Influence of the globalization of the economy and implementation of Habitat Agenda at international level: art. 162 b), art. 203, art. 211, art. 215
- Interference of the public powers on the real estate markets: art. 67 d, art. 67 e), art. 68 g), art. 72 h)
- Implementation of Agenda 21: art. 138
- Best practices: art. 180 n), art. 180 p), art. 192, art. 207
- Monitoring of Habitat Agenda and urban indicators: art. 51, art. 67 b), art. 113, art. 197, art. 239, art. 241.

The action-research:

Popular strategies for the defence of the right to live in towns

In 1997, the General Assembly of Habitat International Coalition - HIC decided the date of 1998 in Venice entrusting Unione Inquilini with this task in cooperation with Habitat & Participation.

A decision was made to prepare a propedeutic phase concerning the carrying out of an international action-research on Popular Strategies to Defend the Right to Retain the Residence in Historic Urban centres.

Its task:

- To analyze the dispersion of the inhabitants from historic centres to better combat it.

Its meaning:

- To identify the numerous experiences worked out by the inhabitants to continue to keep their residences in the historic centres
- To give common evaluation tools able to activate the relationships between citizens' associations and the ONGs
- To reinforce the capability to mobilize the citizens' associations, the ONGs, the co-operatives and especially the HIC, to implement the Habitat Agenda.

It is then a starting point for new transnational action that will help to:

- Create a collection of DPH files of the various experiences to extend the data-bank of UNCHS-HABITAT, of the European Commission and of the European Parliament
- Cross-analyze the various experiences, not only to understand their trends, but even to find out the shared issues of the innovative initiatives worked out by the inhabitants
- Consolidate an international interacting network formed by citizens associations', research centres, ONGs, co-operatives, local committees, as pre-requirement to the running of transnational projects able to activate, in their turn, local, regional, national and transnational, socially sustainable actions for the urban recovery.

At a continental level

Aiming to contribute to European processes of integration and in particular to transnational programs for urban renewal, to the struggle against evictions and to fulfil the obligations of Habitat Agenda, this research has the purpose of activating/reinforcing European network able to:

- Supply inhabitants associations and local institutions with an innovative tool
- Weave a new solidarity among European citizens, including the Eastern Countries
- Introduce and diffuse the knowledge as an indispensable premise for new enterprises and effective policies for the struggle against urban exclusion
- Contribute to the utilization of the co-operation at local, and international level
- Develop an active role of the inhabitants associations to build the future of the European towns.

It is in fact foresaw that beginning from the obtained results, new significant objectives would develop to spread and support new policies for urban recovery and against all kind of exclusion.

This means the creation of an European network on urban transformations as an open Forum with 3 objectives:

1. to identify the numerous experiences developed in Europe with and for the inhabitants themselves about the struggle for the right to maintain their residence in the city centres:

- the experiences carried out by the inhabitants associations, co-operatives, ONGs, etc., which demonstrate the existence of some strong forces committed to fight the social confinement, particularly in defence of the right to housing and to dwell residences in towns, independently of the economical resources
- international inter-exchange dynamics that have favoured and granted the concerned individuals and that have allowed the inhabitants to elaborate some principles

(Inhabitants Forum during Habitat II in Istanbul, European Charter for the Right to housing and the Struggle against exclusion, Declaration de Salvador, etc.) and have acted in connection with the European, international, financial, political and legal decisions and means

- transnational programs for urban recovery and against exclusion that may have a direct or indirect incidence on the inhabitants stay in the city centres
- co-operation between the people and the state regarding urban planning with the aim to annul all forms of social and space segregation.

2. To provide evaluation tools really able to verify:

- how and to what extent the transnational programs (Districts in crisis, Urban, UNESCO MOST, etc.) and the concrete commitment of Habitat Agenda lead to the integration of the concerned populations. The possibility to understand whether these programs help the European integration and harmony
- the pros, the handicaps, the success or the failure of these experiences
- which results and which interactions have been obtained from these experiences
- to what extent the public institutions have accepted the proposals coming from the associations and from the ONGs
- to what extent the national and transnational programs have been able to solve the displacement problems
- to what extent the decisions and the recommendations given within transnational programs, have influenced the growth of the experiences coming from the popular base.

3. To fortify the capability to mobilize the associations, the inhabitants, the ONGs, the co-operatives, in particular of HIC, to implement the Habitat Agenda, to promote the creation of an European Observatory run by the inhabitants, about the urban transformations, to be used as:

- a data-base, connected more to the associative aspects than to the institutions. It should be devoted to proposals, recommendations, new policies and approaches
- data relating to the successful experiences carried out in this field that have enabled the European countries to benefit from their use
- support for the activation of the projects for the urban recovery and restoration, sustainable at social and environmental level
- positive relationships and synergism among inhabitants associations (owners and tenants), ONGs and local authorities
- strengthening of the ability to mobilize these individuals.

The Method

The different aspects of this action-research (case-studies, working groups, etc.) need multidisciplinary knowledge: urban/local management, sociology, economics, law and planning. For this reason, it is necessary to make use of experts coming from different fields: from the community leader to the university professor up to the public administrator.

We have utilized the same method devised by HIC for the past projects presented at the international GONGO program, for Habitat II. That is to say, a direct approach with those individuals which represent both the victims of urban transformation and the protagonists of the struggle against urban exclusion. Consequently, we have not commissioned this task to professional researchers. We have preferred to stimulate the collective memory of the target-subjects, in order to get them to do some self-evaluations and to encourage them to participate as protagonists in a transnational project.

That is why the calls for co-operation have been publicised mainly among the associations and to a lesser degree among researchers and local powers more sensitive to these problems.

Since these questionnaires distributed to the associations are aimed at these possibilities they have brought to light some new questions to the partners of the research, compelling the research promoters to reconsider their roles in the transformation processes of their towns, about the relations linked to the evolution of society and about the economics and the global responsibility of the institutions.

After receiving the first reports, we have sent the outstanding questions, back to authors emphasizing the importance of intelligible writings, such that they are helpful and usable by all concerned partners.

Finally, with the complete reports in hand it has been possible to write the cross-analyses: which is a scrupulous and important task. These analyses should be a model for visualizing the similarities and differences between the various experiences of the associations, as well as the starting point to build up specific transnational projects.

It has not been an easy matter. This analysis still needs to be checked and enriched through the intelligence and the engagement of the working groups and by interested individuals.

In the end, considering the fact that in the near future, the networks exchanging experiences and knowledge will become the means for more effective and collective actions able to transform themselves in real agreements, a further step appears to be necessary.

For 7 years HIC has run an international electronic network concerning the right to housing and against social exclusion: DPH (Dialogues and Documents for Humanity Progress) owns and offers free references on thousands of files, corresponding to a number of cases, to anyone who may ask. Network members have various tasks: the habitat, the town-planning, the study of drug problems, legal awareness, popular communication, the struggle against exclusion, the environment, technical changes, etc. The information will soon be available in Windows, complete with data-base, via Internet. It is an adaptation of the ISIS-UNESCO program.

Through these standardized forms, utilizing key-words, for the geographical position, experience type, etc., it will be possible to access the result of the research.

All the cases studied will be input into DPH network, to establish two basic points:

- the creation of a collection of knowledge and experiences

- the participation and the awareness of the people (inhabitants associations, homeless people, etc.) and of the public administrators which must lead to a wider circulation of the information, from the bottom upwards, with the aim to help making choices and decisions anchored to the reality and to everyday life of citizens.

This cross-analysis is based on 25 studies

The geopolitical division

20 cases are based on towns of the European Union:

- Berlin, Dresden and Munster (Germany)
- 3 districts of Brussels and Frameries town (Belgium)
- Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia (Spain)
- 2 districts of Paris and Courbevoie and Lyons towns (France)
- Glasgow (Scotland)
- Florence, Naples, Rome and Venice (Italy)
- The Hague (The Netherlands)

and 5 in eastern Countries:

- Tuzla (Bosnia-Herzegovina)
- Dubrovnik (Croatia)
- Budapest and Szeged (Hungary)
- Bucarest (Romania)

Nevertheless we must underline that the cases of Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg and Dresden, regard towns in transition from one economy and government to another reality. The fall of Berlin Wall has deeply marked their life.

Not to mention the transformation of the Spanish towns and their passage to democracy from a completely different regime, after Franco's death.

At last, it is not of secondary importance to remember that Tuzla and Dubrovnik still bear the stigmata of the recent war that has harshly struck the people, the social ties and the artistic patrimony of these towns which are, from all points of view, European towns.

In short, this research has offered us the extraordinary chance to cross the political and geographical borders of a new Europe moving forward at different rates. It also allows the possibility of understanding better what is changing in the Old Continent.

The Cross-Analysis

The cause of the dispersion of the inhabitants from the historic centres.

In general terms, all studies agree on the existence of a real Diaspora that strikes the poorest classes of the population, and this happens while more than 80% of Europeans live in towns.

The studies in fact report that this dispersion is very selective because it causes the expulsion of the native residents, principally of the elderly, who are more and more weakened, owing to economic shortage, to welfare cutbacks, to the age and absence of maintenance of the dwellings. The renewal projects for the target-districts forecast their gentrification and a well defined specialisation.

Is this a problem connected to public institutions? With international dynamics or to discrepancies inside the towns themselves?

We do not have clear answers. The key-words given by the authors offer only a partial help in understanding these centrifugal mechanisms. For this reason it has been necessary to pay attention to the case-studies and to formulate new questions to the authors to understand the ties and trends that characterise the exodus of the native inhabitants from the urban centres of the European towns at the end of this millennium.

The Real Estate Degradation and Institutional Mega-Projects

According to the neighbourhoods analysed the real estate of European towns is in general very old and degraded and its age is often the basis on which the renewal projects that deeply modify social settlement are founded.

These changes are planned to give the districts new urban functions, new connotations to make them suitable to economical and political modifications produced at all levels.

It is a particularly obvious trend in 2 of the 3 districts analysed in Brussels.

RisoBrussel Association which operates in the Northern District of the town is engaged to fight the Manhattan Plan, a megalomaniac project that has forced, more or less 15.000 inhabitants to leave their homes and to move elsewhere.

80 towers for offices only, to be raised on a popular district land, have been designed for building up the new Capital of Europe.

It is a battle that sees the involvement of Classe 1, an association which defends the inhabitants of Ilot Stevin, the very heart of the European quarter in the town, against evictions and which helps respecting the social medley in urban environment and housing.

In other words, these two associations have developed a strong awareness of the changes affecting Brussels: in every respect, the creation of the European Union has brought along a complete degradation of the habitat.

Already in the 60s, the liberalization of the markets was responsible for negative rebounds.

The study concerning the 2 districts of Frameries, a Belgian municipality of workers and colliers, shows the decay and the degradation that affect the dwellings and the estates due to the consequences of the economic decline that happened after the abandonment of the coal-mines (the fall of oil prices and the coal-competition from other countries) and the shutting down of shoe factories (low competition on international markets).

It is a matter of industrial decay (and consequently of certain districts) that even Glasgow has more as the beginning of the 70s and that has urged the municipality to elaborate a demolition program for 9 blocks in the central neighbourhood of Reidvale, for a total amount of 1,100 dwellings regarded as low standard ones.

Again, these inhabitants should have been moved to suburbs.

However, it is evident that the European investors have a deep-rooted and old presence even in other towns.

Courbevoie is a reliable evidence: a town of antique origins, situated on the north-west of Paris, that beginning from the 60s, after the creation of the new international tertiary centre of defence, has restored and renewed its districts to welcome businessmen and managers. This re-urbanisation caused throughout the years the expulsion of thousands of people. Only in 1996, there were 1226 evictions made by police, that is to say the 25% of the forced evictions in all France.

With regard to the Eastern Europe, the birth and the development of a free trade market without political barriers crosses the European thresholds.

The experience in the Prenzlauer Berg district in Berlin started before the Wall fell, when inhabitants organised themselves to fight the project to demolish many of the housing schemes in the city, those built at the beginning of the 19th century, in which most of the dwellings had no bathroom, had not maintenance for many years, etc.. This battle is still in progress today as, with the re-introduction of private property and with no public funds for restoration programs, tenants are no longer able to pay the rents, which have become so high that they play a decisive part in the exodus of popular classes.

Therefore, we are faced with the gentrification phenomena, induced by the costs of renovation performed after privatisation of the real estate sector in the East, and against whose effects the inhabitants associations of Dresden are also fighting.

On the other hand, it must be highlighted that lack of maintenance seems to be one of the characteristics of the large housing schemes in cities in the East, which is the main reason for current evictions.

This is the case in Hungary, where more than half of the 850,000 dwellings belonging to the State (about 500,000 at the end of 1996) were sold due to the lack of financial means to carry out maintenance, owing especially to the conditions set by the International Monetary Fund which does not consider this policy sufficiently important to grant financial help.

Under this aspect, it therefore becomes necessary to analyse the initiatives of LABE, the Hungarian Tenants' Association, which takes action against demolition of dwellings in the Nagyvaradi district of Budapest (the objective of this demolition is to

renew the housing units, but this leads to unacceptable increases in prices), and against the destruction of local popular housing, forecast in order to allocate 3,000 housing units in the centre of Szeged ment for banks, offices, businesses, etc..

This situation can be found in other countries with similar political regimes: the UNAL Tenants' association in Romania, estimates that 95% of the 3 million local dwellings which belonged to the State, have become private property since the 1990 revolution, leading to enormous increases in rents. In other terms, due to the lack of financial means to restore dwellings and the passiveness of public authorities, between 3 and 5 million tenants/owners soon run the risk of finding themselves out on the streets.

The paving of this road could also become familiar to the tenants of the historic centre of Dubrovnik, especially those residing in a castle which the public authorities, after the 1991-92 war, decided to allocated to various institutions with cultural-commercial implications. This destination presupposes a political choice and priorities in action: tourism in place of popular housing, commerce in place of the blend of functions. It was therefore decided to move people, made fragile by their age and by the consequences of the privatisation of economy and housing units, towards the outskirts of the city.

This choice is at the basis of true human and social tragedies that run the risk of impoverishing the living web of cities.

On the other side of the Adriatic Sea, a little further north, the number of inhabitants of Venice has decreased owing to a particularly unfavourable trend: added to the increase in specialised tourism in this unique city are the enormous costs required to carry out maintenance on property to protect it against the tides. The sociological and demographic mutation of this city, its gentrification and a certain tendency to turn it into a sort of museum or Disneyworld park, cannot be put down to chance, but are the result of the decision to privilege the preservation of monuments instead of restoring local housing, the construction of large infrastructures in place of attention to the everyday problems of the inhabitants. In this respect, it is necessary to underline the role of the international community, which pushes in this direction, both as regards financing aimed in general towards single-function and safeguarding buildings, and with financing of the real estate market that favours, with the jet-set's arrival at the Lagoon, the mass influx of privileged social classes from all over the world.

Natural Causes and political laissez-faire

Natural causes, particularly exploitation of resources are at the base of other types of expulsion.

For example in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the decision to continue extracting rock-salt from the mines around the city, instead of suspending this and renovating dwellings, has caused the ground in the historic centre of the city to subside and the exodus of about 10,000 inhabitants over the last forty years.

Also natural catastrophes, like the Naples earthquake in 1980, can contribute to the destruction of the social ties unless action is taken at all levels.

With a view to this, the paper drawn up by the Tenants' Union (Unione Inquilini) clearly shows the challenges undertaken with the choice to rebuild in certain surrounding districts instead of restoring the centre destroyed by the earthquake and

underlines that this choice results from the will to change the social physiognomy by attempting to uproot the informal economy which is its very life. In other terms, although it appears that national and international public funding would have covered the restoration and reconstruction of damaged buildings, this objective was not actually achieved. Instead, property yield and firms linked to the Camorra have benefited.

Real property and commercial speculation and the lack of political will

With regard to other Italian situations analysed, we can find many points in common between the situations present in Rome and Florence.

The crisis in city centres is, in fact, rooted in the public authorities' lack of policy for structural action: there are no plans for restoring housing and town planning that can be sustained from a social point of view. The changes in destination of use of property (both legal and illegal) lead to a social thinning of town centres before these are transformed into offices, shops or luxury dwellings; laws on rental (agreements in derogation of fair rental) favour uncontrolled increases in rents and eviction for expiry of tenancy. There is also a noteworthy deficit in social housing (only 5.6% of the total on a national level), made worse by the lack of maintenance, caused by the privatisation policies in the sector.

The situation is similar to Madrid, where the abandonment of the Casco Antiguo, which started in the 70s, has favoured the degradation of properties to such an extent that they are on the point of collapsing. Therefore, the owners have a good reason to evict the tenants who, otherwise, could have continued to benefit from the legal protection regarding the block of evictions after the second World war.

In the same way, the dereliction of the Casc Antic in Barcelona has justified a tough plan of action, judged by the Plataforma Habitat España as true urban assault, known as the Plan Comarcal: a commercial plan that envisages the opening of two avenues which would cut this working class district into four parts.

Another example of this is the urban reclamation and renewal plan envisaged in the city centre district of Velluters in Valencia, which pushes residents towards expulsion. In fact, the opening of large avenues and squares increases the price of land and property, whilst delays in the renovation of degraded housing alienates for ever, the weakest social classes, that is the majority of inhabitants.

The case study underlines the fact that these negative effects occur even in the event of help from the public administration.

Therefore, the Public Administration seems to be an extremely important party which, in certain cities, instead of ensuring that housing rights, social blending and integration are satisfied, causes, or at least fails to contrast expulsion efficiently in order to favour the specialisation of city centre districts.

The case of Lyon, with the penetration of the Moncey Axis in the Place du Pont district, demonstrates this fact: between 1991 and 1997, 200 empty and degraded dwellings and boarding houses were in fact demolished, notwithstanding the fact that the public administration had apparently abandoned this project, thus giving a free hand to private investors in terms of speculation.

The renovation plan for the Schilderswijk district in The Hague seems to be of the same nature. The Oranjeplein, named after the main square in the district, in the early

70s in fact envisaged the demolition of all dwellings and their replacement with high-rise blocks. The reason for this was simply to widen the roads penetrating the district, thus finding a solution to the increase in road traffic, and at the same time favouring property yield by creating apartments with much higher rents.

In 1989, in the Belleville district in Paris, it was once again the public administration which contemplated a somewhat oppressive plan for renovating the blocks: 95% of the buildings were to be demolished to make way for commercial buildings, offices, hotels and dwellings so called standing: flats with luxury features and prices which the population could not afford. This therefore was a demolition-rebuilding project which would have changed both the physiognomy of property and the demographic and social composition within the district.

The habitat ran the risk of disappearing when the municipalities approve not only the projects concerning housing, but when these projects also damage those places delegated over the centuries to functions of socialisation.

This is the case of the market des Enfants Rouges in the Marais et Temple district of Paris: instead of renovating the old market, regarded as the village square, the council's objective at the start of the 90s was to demolish it to make way for a car park and some services inherent to luxury property operations.

The fragility of target subjects

The inhabitants of the districts involved in processes of expulsion and/or urban renovation, in most of the cities analysed, and at times the majority of these, are either immigrants or of foreign origin: 48% in Belleville, 70% in Schilderswijk, 36% in Place Du Pont, 50% in Courbevoie, more than 60% in the North district of Brussels.

Whilst the tendency of the middle classes, in the past few years, was to abandon the city centres in order to choose single houses and small villas in the country, immigrants settled in the town centres, which used to be less expensive, thus preserving the residential function and a certain level of property yield.

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that, in general terms, renovation is a simpler social management in those cases in which individuals involved are in a more fragile class. In fact, it is easier to evict tenants without a contract, at times with no documents and immigrants without voting rights, than owners and inhabitants well-established on a social and political level.

This means that, at least in certain cases, the change in destination of use and property speculation are hidden behind smoke and/or demagogic screens (making districts safe, expelling subjects/ethnic groups which run the risk of changing the physiognomy of the city, protecting the historic heritage and environment, etc.) to justify what are actually operations of ethnic and social cleansing in the eyes of public opinion.

To sum up, the case studies underline that immigrants play a marginal role, of simple users/clients of city centres. At the time in which some fear the social, political and economic placing of roots of immigrants, it seems that the social conflict concerning the rights of use of city centres plays an important part in the fight between cities demands for integration/evolution and rejection of social and cultural blending.

Fights and parties

Against these processes of transformation and expulsion, of various degrees of weight and legality, what are the demands and what are the strategies used by the social parties, what are the initiatives taken in the fight to remain in the city centres?

The greatest surprise concerns the source of the answers taken from the districts contemplated in this research.

In fact, notwithstanding the recent opening of geographical-political frontiers, both in the East and West, the majority of experiences recorded come from basic organisms, which we can divide according to the following diagram:

- 7 Tenants/Homeless associations (Croatian Tenants' Union in Dubrovnik, General Confederation of Housing - CGL in Paris, LABE in Szeged and Budapest, Movement for the Fight for Housing in Florence, Tenants' Union in Naples, National Union of Tenants' Associations in Bucharest)
- 10 inhabitants' associations or networks (RisoBrussel, Comité de la Samaritaine and Classe I in Brussels, Plataforma Habitat España in Madrid and Barcelona, Vecinos Association in Valencia, District Committee in Lyon, La Bellevilleuse Association and Marché des Enfants Rouges Defence Collective in Paris, Payable Rents in The Hague)
- 3 ONGs (STERN in Berlin, Planerkollektiv in Dresden, Reidvale Housing Association Ltd in Glasgow)
- 1 co-operative (Vivere 2000 in Rome)

Only 4 reports concern initiatives taken by public administrations (Munster, Frameries, Tuzla, Venice).

The experiences described often concern conflicts over private property or public authorities, at times partnership with other subjects.

Outwardly, certain forms of initiative seem similar.

Nonetheless, even although to simplify analysis we have classified the experiences using key-words, nothing authorises us to attach indelible labels.

Open conflict

For example, we can group together certain types of initiative under the term antagonism, such as those undertaken in Naples by the Unione Inquilini, or in Florence by the Movement for the Fight for Housing: accusation of the power of property yield, of the complicity with public administration and the central government, fight against the city as a market, occupation of empty dwellings, demonstrations, etc..

Elements in favour

These are fights which lead to immediate results: blocking of some evictions, allocation of dwellings to needy subjects, awakening to urban problems.

Handicaps

Difficulty in establishing confrontation with the opposite parties, the risk of confinement/criminalisation of fights, discontinuity of initiatives, the risk of schizophrenia between the enunciation of principles and everyday management.

Self-management

There is also the question of self-management, which translates into the claim and the practice of self-restoration of degraded dwellings. For example, this is the case of the proposal by tenants/owners sustained by STERN in Berlin.

Nonetheless, Germany does not hold the monopoly of these policies: similar experiences also exist in Florence and Naples, where the Unione Inquilini proposed the project named Utopia Village (to build decent dwellings with the help of tenants and the homeless, on land where there are still prefabricated buildings for earthquake victims).

The claim for self-management is also one of the features of the experience of Classe 1 in Brussels. The project is a global revival of the district, supported by the innovative idea of paying rents in various forms, in particular by investing the tenants' time in providing cultural services and labour to renovate housing.

Paying rent with self-restoration is again the proposal and concrete solution of an initiative that has been operating in Rome since 1989, conducted by the Co-operative Vivere 2000: to renovate and reallocate the use of the former St. Agatha Convent in the city centre to social housing.

Elements in favour

Elaboration of this policy means self-managing the habitat, thus developing an essential component of the lived-in environment, in the attempt to escape from market logic; it also means finding a solution, in terms of precise and/or sustainable implementation, to the demands of the inhabitants; last but not least, it allows the essential passage to organise the continuation of claims to be guaranteed.

Handicaps

The gap between the rhythm of day to day life and the rhythms of political/bureaucratic life runs the risk of creating diffidence in the inhabitants towards institutions and/or the associations. Moreover, the taking on of certain problems, especially without the means required to solve them, can have a boomerang effect for the associations.

Public-private partnership

The forming of partnerships starting from conflicts.

This sums up the main point in common between the experiences of the Marché des Enfants Rouges Defence Collective and the Bellevilleuse Association in Paris, the RisoBrussel and the Comité de la Samaritaine in Brussels, the Plataforma Habitat España in Madrid and Barcelona, the Vecinos Association in Valencia, the District Committee in Lyon and Payable Rents in The Hague.

In all these experiences, the initiatives of the associations and the inhabitants threatened with eviction were not always of the compliant type: occupation of empty houses, meetings, occupation of pavements to sleep outdoors as a form of protest, etc. are characteristics of movements which, above all, combat the projects of other social and institutional parties whose aims they do not agree with.

Another example of this, although at a greater degree of institutionalisation, is the situation of the Reidvale Housing Association, which was able to pick up the inheritance of the fights of the inhabitants of Glasgow against demolitions, directing it towards a partnership that provided appreciable results.

With regard to the Dresden case, this appears again to be an initiative aimed at constructing a partnership between council administration and inhabitants' associations. Also in this case there are numerous protests and occupation of empty houses, other signs of radical objections to the Rückgabe vor Entschädigung, that is to say the principle of privatisation that contemplates the return of property to the former owners.

Elements in favour

These initiatives form a true school of democracy and participation, both for inhabitants and institutions, particularly in countries in a transitional stage; they also become the foundations upon which to build a collective memory capable of providing the social parties involved with a strong identity, from a cultural and political viewpoint; lastly, these initiatives may also lead to immediate results, such as blocking some evictions, and valorise people's specific duties.

Handicaps

The gap between everyday life and political/bureaucratic oppressiveness run the risk of generating diffidence in the inhabitants against institutions and/or associations. On the other hand, the acknowledgement of associations by the institutions, when these are free of democratic control, can cause a certain amount of confusion in the parties' roles and, sooner or later, loss of the original aims.

Moreover, it is important to point out there are also formulas of partnership as a choice of ruling: some public administrations in fact wish to involve the inhabitants in urban renovation processes.

The case of Munster is extremely interesting in this regard, as it demonstrates the success of the policy for the restoration of a district, which was otherwise subjected to confinement, thanks to the participation of its inhabitants.

On the other hand, it would be somehow stimulating to study the policy of the council of Venice, which recently decided to opt for participation in order to combat displacement and exodus.

Elements in favour

This type of proposal, which is moreover somewhat rare, has the advantage of favouring the participation of inhabitants, thus strengthening the statute, and of offering the chance to promote transnational projects.

Handicaps

By institutionalising associations there is a risk that inhabitants will be alienated from active participation; this could also weaken the capacity of activating initiatives for the fights required in the event of the blockage by the opponents.

Juridical conflicts

Lastly, we must delve into the claims for legality, that is to say compliance with laws which could protect inhabitants against evacuation and eviction, or in any case guarantee that they are rehoused acceptably.

In the case of the CGL in Courbevoie, these are mainly amicable negotiations, consisting of a request for partnership with all social parties involved (tenants, owners, lawyers, prefecture, court officials, police, social services, council, media) in the management of buffer- and-rehousing- operations.

With a view to this, it is somewhat illuminating to note that almost all cases regarding Eastern European countries, Tuzla, Dubrovnik, Budapest, Szeged and Bucharest, come under this category.

The associations contest, as is the case in the two Hungarian cities, incorrect application of the law on privatisation, regarded as one of the major causes of the upsurge in rents.

Another example: in Tuzla the associations appeal to the authorities for legal rehousing programs.

This means that, notwithstanding the transition from the old to the new regime, and in spite of the inadequacy of the law with respect to the market, the citizens still have a certain respect for the institutions. At the same time, there is an increasingly pressing request for new laws that can stand up against the situation of a real estate market without any control or regulation, as is the case of the UNAL in Romania.

Elements in favour

By using the articles of the Civil Code carefully, these initiatives give some answers to the parties involved; from another aspect, they can become the basis upon which to build a lasting partnership, even in the event that this has still not been institutionalised. Lastly, through the effect of jurisprudence, these contribute to the evolution of laws.

Handicaps

Excessive faith in the legal instrument runs the risk of raising hopes; this defence could turn out to be a dead end unless there is a favourable legal framework for the inhabitants. This same faith runs the risk of suppressing the initiatives for conflict on a more substantial levels and/or of promoting a formal partnership or, even worse, one which works against the inhabitants.

On an international level

Almost all the case studies offer the occasion to look at influences at an international level on the transformation processes of the historic city centres.

These are influences from markets and urban politics, increasingly interdependent, and interpersonal influences.

Notwithstanding the presence of these factors, subjects involved and social parties undertaking initiatives to safeguard social housing do not always have the awareness to share this type of transnational process. In fact, even if the factor is present in the case studies to a greater or lesser extent, true commitment on this level does not always ensue.

In fact, we can find general references to the protest movement of the 70s in the fight of the inhabitants of Schilderswijk, but there are neither strategies nor initiatives in common with associations from other countries.

In the same way the experiences concerning the battles against the effects of installing Brussels as the capital of Europe, did not lead to an increase in alliance with the inhabitants of districts in other European cities threatened with similar operations.

Similarly, the initiatives of the inhabitants of Eastern European countries against the effects of privatisation and the opening of property markets, should favour the organisation of projects on a transnational level to confront the contemporary lack of commitment of public authorities from housing policies.

It is true that, for example in the Romanian cities, tenants asked the World Bank and the European Investment Bank to take action with credit programmes aimed at repairing housing and restoring degraded districts. However, the replies of these institutions were non-replies: the restoration of city centres, when this is aimed at safeguarding social blend, does not seem to be considered as a priority policy in the transition towards market economy.

An even crueller truth regards cities hit by war in the former Yugoslavia where, while massive destruction was the result of political choices that can also be read on an international level, this same international community is not in the least concerned with rebuilding the houses and social environment in the city centres.

Nonetheless, we must not wonder at the lack of commitment of countries situated outside the European Union, boundaries as even within the 15 members it is often difficult and at times impossible to substantiate the implementation of transnational projects which emphasize a careful approach to these problems.

In fact, there are without doubt many community programmes on an urban level, as regards social research, sustainable development, social cohesion, regional policies, transport, safeguarding monuments, etc..

In particular, we must mention the Urban Program which, from 1994 to 1999, contemplates the investment of about 870 million ECU in about one hundred critical districts in 85 cities located throughout the European Union.

However, it is just as important to underline the evolution of this program. The first generation of this type of action, called Urban Pilot Projects (1989-93), had in fact established four general aims: development of critical districts, renovation of historic centres, support of ecological initiatives with positive economic influence, valorisation of urban technological resources. Subsequently, these were replaced by a second generation, directing action towards the totality of problems that affect unfavoured districts: support for employment by creating businesses, professional orientation and training, improving the infrastructures, safeguarding the environment, support of equal opportunities between men and women, implementation of social infrastructures, etc..

With regard to our research, almost half the cities involved benefit from these community projects, that is 11 out of 25. These are Glasgow, Berlin, The Hague,

Brussels, Paris, Lyon, Naples, Rome, Venice, Madrid and Valencia. Among these, it must also be pointed out that the Urban Programme takes action in the historic centre of only one in four cities: Berlin, The Hague, Lyon, Naples, Madrid and Valencia.

At the same time, even if the city centre districts of Naples are regarded as a Heritage of Humanity by the UNESCO, this title has still not been translated into the improvement of dwellings and the environment.

In all cases examined, only the reports concerning Berlin, Madrid and Valencia describe some positive effects of the Urban Programme, although strong doubts still remain with regard to positive social influences in Valencia.

In many other cases Urban seems to be involved in other sectors, such as in Lyon, where the programme supports the commercial sector in suburban districts.

On the other hand, it must be underlined that at times, even although some public administrations present files within the framework of Urban, requests containing projects to restore the city centre are rejected, as the case study on RisoBrussel in the North Brussels district reports.

Lastly, those who had hoped for a change in these trends with Habitat II have had to submit once again to the reality of a general lack of sensitivity by local, national and transnational authorities concerning the commitments undertaken with the Habitat Agenda.

However, this disappointment was rather foreseeable, if one takes account of the fact that, in almost all cases, national governments did not invite inhabitants' associations to join the national Committees for Habitat II.

Two years after the Istanbul summit, reports received are unanimous in indicating that there have been no follow-up, nor has there been positive influence in terms of improvement in urban and social restoration policies in historic centres.

Meanings, principles and political proposals

The session of the United Nations Commission about Human Settlements, scheduled for 1999, will give a first evaluation on the implementation of Habitat Agenda.

UNCHS-Habitat will ask the appointed governments about the completion and the updating of the urban indicator guides.

But it is not a problem of mere data presentation. UNCHS-Habitat underlines the importance of supporting more accurate studies, namely to those initiative carried out by inhabitant's associations, co-operatives, communities, etc., which result as a real cues for new policies in defence of the right to housing.

In view of this deadline, to achieve an ample mobilisation able to modify the selective and centrifugal pressure on the displacement of the inhabitants of the historic city centres and to show, through actual data, that the urban recovery processes are now more aware of the human needs, it should be necessary to re-orient some policies.

It is not a simple task. First, it is necessary to integrate some principles and meanings achieved at the Meeting of Istanbul.

Otherwise, it will be rather difficult for the affected people to take on a burden that in the majority of cases will remain closed inside someone's drawer.

To prize the suggestions

The case-studies agree that these initiatives of urban recovery must be negotiated with all the concerned subjects, in particular with the inhabitants of the historic city centres, to allow the life and the evolution of towns.

The reports unanimously emphasize the untouchable principle of the inhabitants right to live in the town. This means that all real estate operations must consider the existence of these persons, which are not ghostly present: on the contrary, they represent an insuppressible value.

This disregarded value, in the majority of cases, is the trigger that primes the success or the failure of the projects.

A macroscopic example is given by Quartiere delle Vele in Naples that has been built as an illuminated answer to housing demand from the homeless and shortly after, turned into the symbol of degradation and confinement: after 10 years of battles, it has been pulled down.

Quite the contrary is the success obtained by the Reidvale Housing Association for the recovery of a district in Glasgow that is more significant if we consider the failure of many such projects in the same town that did not have inhabitants participation.

The first step is to put together all partners, investors, public administrators, inhabitants associations, sociologists and researchers etc., to:

- evaluate the presupposition for real needs
- discuss the duties of each partner
- establish a correspondence between plan and action
- try to find solutions that answer the questions raised.

Evaluate the presuppositions for real needs

Before starting with the operations on districts there must be a verification if they are works designed to improve human and town environment, defending the presence of all social classes or, on the contrary, if they may hide estate investments and speculation that may cause social exclusion and space confinement.

In particular, it would be extremely helpful to introduce a further and obligatory evaluation about the social impact brought about by the urban renewal/recovery operations.

For example: the planning of an avenue or the building of a commercial centre, whereas the recovery of popular dwellings would be auspicious, represent a definite choice. Nevertheless there is always the possibility to graduate the situations that could make the difference between an actual conflict and the research for acceptable solutions.

Far from the introduction of any prejudices, this preventive evaluation appears to be necessary to give all the interested parts the possibility to integrate, improve, re-orientate and, eventually, to cancel the projects.

In other words, this means to learn how to recognize, strengthen and stimulate the districts dynamics such as the First Principle of Declaration de Salvador.

Discuss the duties of each partner

These initiatives, battles and demands made by the inhabitants agree about the need to use new democracy tools that will give voice those who do not have such a right.

It is a request of partnership that originates even from the most conflictual situations, because it arises from the desire to give an alternative to the lost trust of the citizens towards institutions and political speculation.

Creating the word and sites to express it is the biggest challenge within democracy, in Western countries as well as in Eastern ones.

But, we must not idealize this aspect: what it is important is to underline that a new revived confidence coming from inhabitants could generate unexpected results.

In other words, it is preliminary the recognition of the aspirations and the interests of the inhabitants, that is according to the Third Principle of the Declaracion de Salvador.

Additionally, this means the restrengthening of the statute of the inhabitants, that is according to the second principle of the Declaracion de Salvador.

Establish a correspondence between plan and action

Some studies underline the difficulties that people incur during renewal/recovery operations of buildings. At times the decisions and operations of demolition are so sudden and quick that they cause upsetting and desperation for inhabitants. There is no time to find alternative dwellings and this causes exclusion feelings and identity loss. At times, necessary operations to recover degraded buildings take such a long time that inhabitants lose their hope and trust towards public administration and they prefer to give up and to move and find other places to survive.

For these reasons it is of vital importance to start planning various tasks and an agenda able to involve all partners for the projects designed for historic centres.

To achieve these results it would be necessary to correlate administrative and political rhythms with life rhythms of people.

This means the application of the Fifth Principle of the Declaracion de Salvador.

To attain this aim it is necessary to reform the management of public administration.

This is stated in the Fourth Principle of the Declaracion de Salvador.

Try to find solutions that answer the questions raised

Often are the financial means that decide the choice of the projects for renewal of estates without taking into account that the individuals are the main actors within concerned districts life.

It is not easy to find solutions able to satisfy all needs, but if there are individuals within the public and private sectors, ready and willing to share and carry ahead together new projects, it would appear easier to privilege proposals that defend the right to housing.

In other occasions it seems that a project planned with local and national solidarity will have a better chance to succeed as social sustainable project, when it meets analogue international solidarity.

This is why it is necessary to activate financial mechanisms connected with the targets to be achieved.

This is the Sixth Principle of the Declaracion de Salvador.

Transnational proposals

Create a transnational dossier and more precisely a Dossier for Europe, it is not an easy task nor automatic mechanism, because often the concerned associations are busy with different duties at local level. Nevertheless, it is now appearing among associations the demand for exchanges and the desire to know what is happening over the boundaries of district/town/country.

This is the first step of creating transnational projects aimed at defence of the right to live in city centres.

Among these projects it has to be underlined the activation of an European Observatory run by inhabitants on the urban transformation as independent tool, able to provide all partners with proposals and advice, but particularly, to supply through this data, local, national, transnational and political powers.

The effects of globalization of the markets seem to have the power of activating the demand for contacts among associations through networks, to front urban exclusion.

Time-sharing and self-restoration proposals appear to be the concrete solutions to demands to housing and a safeguard of social blends.

Not only Western Countries but also the Eastern ones are trying to face the problems related to urban recovery by means of partnerships with towns and countries across boundaries.

It may be emphasized that these proposals might represent an essential help to European social cohesion.

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