

Living and Learning: A New Identity for Student Housing in City Suburbs



Oscar E. Bellini, Matteo Gambaro and Martino Mocchi

Abstract The role of student housing in academic formative paths is rapidly changing and increasing in importance. According to international trends, university residencies are shifting their function from mere dormitories for students to more open structures for urban territories and the local population and are starting to be considered as important opportunities for enhancing and revitalizing the peripheral and problematic contexts in which they often are located. The case of the Politecnico di Milano is emblematic, due to the large investments the university injected into this sector over recent years, leading to the opening of three new residencies in the suburbs of Milan. This chapter reports on the activities developed by the authors over the last few years, aiming at fostering a more direct relationship among academic knowledge, educational strategies, and urban contexts. This comes via the experimentation of new forms of didactic and research, which attach great importance for university residencies for their possibility to share services, facilities, knowledge among students and the local population. The research focuses on the consequences of this change not only in sociological terms, but also in architectural ones, considering the new implications for the morpho-techno-typological design of structures. The results aim at going beyond the rigid constraints of the current regulation, developing a more open approach to design, which could be a starting point for the advisable revision of the law 338/2000, which is now 20 years old.

Keywords Student housing · Urban regeneration · Social capital · Human capital · Multicultural processes

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1 New Perspectives for Student Housing¹

The role of student housing in academic formative paths is rapidly changing and increasing in importance, with a view of the broadening of learning and educational processes, triggering new forms of socialization, developing sharing habits, fostering emancipation from families (Micheli 2008; Rosina et al. 2007; Agnoli 2010) increasing the sense of responsibility, promoting exchange and dialogue among students coming from different cultures and traditions, also from the standpoint of their involvement in public life (Livi Bacci 2008; Abidin et al. 2011; Costa 2014; Naji et al. 2014; Eikemo and Judith Thomsen 2018).

In encouraging a new way of living, based on the acceptance of rules, timetables and deadlines, student housing contributes to developing the moral and civic quality of individuals, enhancing their social disposition and fostering an idea of “education as life” (Simmel 1995) in which interpersonal relationships and relational context become key elements to increase the individual’s faculties and skills in an economic, cultural, and social perspective. Not surprisingly, the ability to meet the student housing demand is affirming itself as an increasingly relevant factor in the definition of international rankings and in the evaluation of the quality of universities (Downing et al. 2017).

This raises the question of the effectiveness of the policies implemented in our country over the last decades, aiming at increasing the overall number of students’ matriculations, without specific reflections on structures and strategies to raise a higher level of social and collective education. This situation needs to find a solution quickly, fostering new consideration for student housing, both from a morpho-technological perspective (Bellini 2015, 2019a, b; Newman 2016) and from a social one. The new users of residencies, their crescent variety in terms of age, nationality, academic role, education raise the necessity to adapt the functional and organizational offer of these structures to the new social and cultural scenario (McBride 2017) (Fig. 1).

Far from being considered as mere structures dedicated to temporary accommodation for foreign students, student housing should be regarded as a public service: a fundamental element to support academic, didactic, and research activities as well as to provide facilities and services for the collective cultural and recreational growth of population, generating new human and social capital (Ciaramella and Del Gatto 2012; Laudisa 2013; Bellini et al. 2015; Bosio et al. 2018; Eversley 2019).

¹The present paper illustrates activities and studies made possible by the collaboration between the ABC Department and the ATE—Area Tecnico Edilizia—of the Politecnico di Milano.

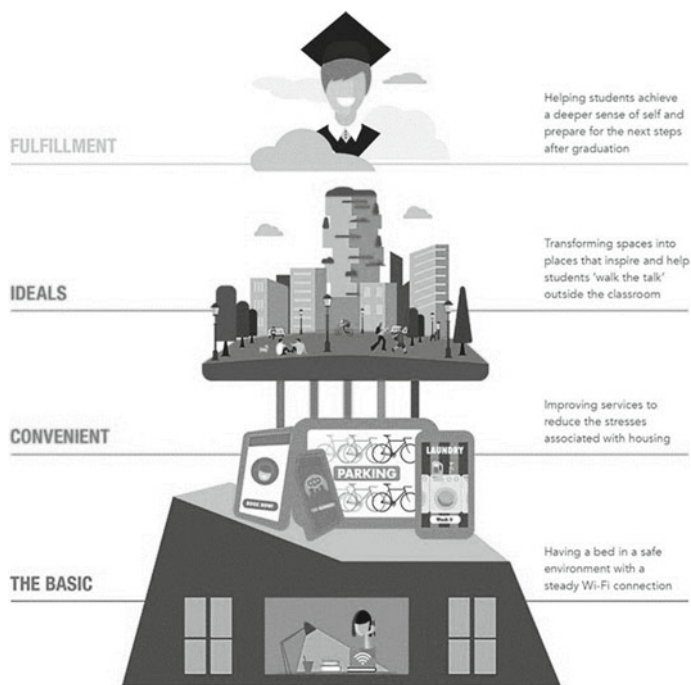


Fig. 1 Maslow pyramid of student accommodation

2 The Case of the Politecnico di Milano

This reflection frames the strategic investment of the Politecnico di Milano, which over the last decades doubled the sleeping accommodation for its students, by activating to date seven new student residencies in Milano, Lecco, and Como.² The result has been achieved both through the renovation of existing structures and the realization of new ones that enhance the outstanding supply (Fig. 2).³ This situation

²The success of the initiative is a result of the significant financing located by MIUR—Ministry of Education through the law 338/2000 for the development of student housing in Italy. As it clearly appeared in the text of the law, the Ministry aimed at favoring an integration between student residencies and urban contexts, requiring a continuum in the social and services fabric of the city (Del Nord 2014). Despite these intentions, the rigidity in the following implementation procedures and the definition of unavoidable spatial and functional requirements made a real experimentation difficult, both in the design of new spaces adequate for a new type of users and in the development of new educational paths (Bellini and Mocchi 2016).

³With funding from the law 338/2000, the Politecnico di Milano could increase its student housing offer by 1515 sleeping units, among which 1150 in Milan. The residencies involved are Galileo Galilei (406 beds, Corridoni Street, Milan), Adolf Loos (200 beds, Ghislanzoni Street, Lecco), La Presentazione (165 beds, via Zezio, Como), Leonardo da Vinci (333 beds, Romagna Avenue, Milan), Isaac Newton (258 beds, Mario Borsa Street, Milan) Vilfredo Pareto (232 beds, Maggianico Street, Milan), and Albert Einstein (214 beds, Einstein Street, Milan). All these interventions provide a



Fig. 2 Student residence “Isaac Newton” of the Politecnico di Milano, in the Gallarate District

is destined to grow as a consequence of the fourth implementation procedure of the law 338/2000, which will allow the Politecnico di Milano to realize three new interventions, adding 834 new sleeping accommodations to its offer.⁴ The importance and the size of this venture, as well as the urban placement of the new buildings, make the case particularly meaningful to understand the new management praxis and the operational procedures involved in the phenomenon (Bellini et al. 2016).

The first interesting point is the tendency to locate new student housing facilities in peripheral areas of the city as well, characterized by the lack of common services and difficulties in social integration and cultural dialogue among citizens. This is also produced by the situation of the historical center, denoted by strict building heritage protection, determining a general growth of the price of real estate and limited flexibility in its reconversion.

In this scenario, the authors initiated a study to focus on the proactive role of student housing in urban regeneration processes, both at a physical level—in relation to the common spaces and facilities that they provide to districts—and at a social one—considering the importance of students in understanding the multicultural problems of citizens who live in suburbs. After a general analysis, the more suited residence for starting the experimentation turned out to be the Newton one, in the Gallarate District (Fig. 2). Due to its urban, social, and historical context, as

significant contribution in the requalification of their urban contexts, often in the suburbs of the city, characterized by environmental and social problems.

⁴Law 338/2000 on student housing, IV implementation procedure (D.M. n. 937/2016), ranking of accepted projects for financing approved by the Commission on July 5, 2018 (report n. 11/2018 all. n. 4), published in the Official Gazette of Italian Republic on March 29, 2019, Serie generale n. 75.

well as its morpho-techno-typological traits, the residence represents the best qualities for a field trial. The choice is determined by the heavy social and territorial problems of Gallaratese,⁵ confirmed by its inclusion among the five areas of the competition “Bando alle periferie” fostered by the Municipality of Milano in 2017.

In this scenario, Newton residence introduces 258 students from 20 different nationalities, becoming an integral part of the urban fabric—on average, students live in the district for more than one year. The students represent a micro-community, in some respects bound together by the same problems of the local community—difficulties of integration and cultural comprehension, linguistic barriers, distance from home—in others characterized by original traits—high cultural profile, belonging to a young and homogeneous age range. If not properly considered and treated, this resource risks becoming a negative factor for the population and the urban environment, fostering undesirable processes such as “studentification”.⁶

In order to avoid this situation, the research group focuses on the definition of an innovative multidisciplinary and multi-scale strategy, able to foster a reciprocity among academic knowledge, technical apparatus and local fragilities, fostering a shared environmental and social atmosphere as the condition for promoting a sense of belonging for individuals to their urban context and local community. According to international studies and experimentations (Ferrante 2012; Hassan et al. 2012; Khajezadeh and Brenda 2016; Kader 2017), this approach could produce significant consequences for urban territories, also in view of the participation and sensibilization of local people on urgent topics such as social integration, environmental sustainability, food education, waste reduction, sustainable mobility (Fig. 3).⁷

⁵“Gallaratese San Leonardo” District (corresponding to NIL—Local Identity Unit 65) has a population of 31,481 units (source: Municipality of Milano, Piano Servizi, rev. 2016) and characterized by the presence of elderly residents (35.3% against the average of 23.7% in the whole city) with a significant percentage of over-85-year-olds. The impact of foreigner citizens is relatively low (8.8% against 18.8%), even if it increases among underaged people (22%). In particular, the urban area close to the residence, including ALER housing in Bolla Street, is characterized by strong degradation, with social conflicts, illegal occupation of apartments, lack of health facilities, sport and educational services, and infrastructures (Piano dei Servizi of PGT of Milano).

⁶According to the literature on gentrification (Borlini and Memo 2008; Semi 2015), “studentification” represents a recent phenomenon, characterized by speculative trends in local rental markets, changes in the commercial activities and services in favor of students’ needs, processes of marginalization of old citizens.

⁷As demonstrated by a number of examples: Stanford University (Sustainable Stanford), Harvard (Water Taste Test, Food Better, Mount Trashmore), Ball State (Energy Action Team, Dinner Dark, America Recycles Day Party), Yale (Sustainable Yale), Lausanne University (VolteFace, Troc-o-Pole, Carrot City), University of York (Fairtrade), University of Melbourne (Bokashi Bucket). All these actions started from the idea of “sustainable campus” (<https://www.international-sustainable-campus-network.org/>), using student housing facilities to foster a dialogue between university and local urban environments (Radder and Han 2009).



Fig. 3 Public space facilities in Newton student residence

3 Ongoing Projects

The ongoing projects are the result of a study conducted by the authors over recent years, which has already produced publications on the topic (Bellini 2015), participation in seminars and conferences (Bellini and Mocchi 2016; Bellini 2019b; Mocchi 2019), field classes and activities.⁸ The results so far achieved confirm a dynamic situation, made up of cooperative students and a local network of stakeholders, associations, and players already active in the area.⁹

⁸The “Building Technology Studio” 2018/19 (prof. Gambaro, Aceti) concentrates on the design of the open spaces of the Newton student residence, aiming at defining public areas and services dedicated to both students and local people. During the course, specific on-field activities were organized as well as seminars involving experts and operators of student housing (Adolfo Baratta, Fabrizio Schiaffonati, Francesco Vitola, Oscar Eugenio Bellini, Maria Teresa Gullace). The results of the course will be presented at the “Biennale dello spazio pubblico” held in Rome, May 31–June 1, 2019. Several dissertations and degree theses on the same topics have been developed over the last few years.

⁹A survey has been developed among the students hosted in the Newton residence, aiming at knowing their opinion about their quality of life and their availability to take part in activities involving local people. According to Veronica Signorelli’s dissertation—entitled “Residenze universitarie: una nuova risorsa sociale,” tutor: O. E. Bellini, A.A. 2017/18—117 students out of the 232 interviewed (50.8%) are available to take part in the experimentations. The students come from different nationalities, among which Italy, India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and China. They are equally divided in terms of gender and education. The general opinion of the students regarding the residence is positive, even if they reveal a number of issues with regards to the urban position (distance from the city center and the university structures) and the management of common spaces (lack of cooking areas, noise). Local associations and players are very active on the territory, promoting activities

In 2017, the authors developed a project to take part in the competition Polisocial,¹⁰ which in that year was dedicated to the theme “Periphery.” The project had the merit to start a collaboration among departments dedicated to research and technical bodies—“ATE—Area Tecnico Edilizia,” “Servizio Residenze”—fostering a better comprehension of the student housing phenomenon in terms of management and financing, on the basis of which to orient the research phase. The project had the endorsement of important institutions operating in the sector, such as the University of Milano—Direzione del Patrimonio Immobiliare, Centro Studi TESIS, RUI Foundation, Legambiente.

The study identifies four areas of intervention, in which social inclusion plays a fundamental and strategic role: 1 (In) social, including activities of learning, education, social cohesion; 2 (In) environment, with actions related to the environment, sustainability, circular economy; 3 (In) sport, considering sport activities as a fundamental part of the student housing experience; 4 (In) science, for contributing to the dissemination of scientific research.

The experimentation is now part of the Off Campus project, a development program financed by Polisocial. The program aims at fostering new forms of field teaching and research, putting into relation the academic organisms and knowledge with the local community’s needs.¹¹ Off Campus are physical structures placed in the city, working as delocalized satellites of the university, able to encourage on-field research and teaching activities, with a specific attention to the characteristics of places, the relationships between university and local reality, the way of living and dwelling in urban territories. The presence of students inside this area represents a big opportunity for the territory, leading to the idea of opening an Off Campus satellite in the Newton residence (Fig. 4).

for raising awareness and building citizenship within the local population. Among others, we can mention the network “Non Riservato,” fostering initiatives such as “Gallab” or “Quartiere Aperto.”

¹⁰Polisocial is the Politecnico di Milano’s social responsibility program, a fundamental part of the university’s Third Mission, to promote new multidisciplinary programs for human and social development, increasing the educational opportunities and the chances for dialogue and confrontation among students and researchers. The project submitted to the Polisocial Award, entitled “Polimi (in) Social,” has been developed by the following working group: Oscar E. Bellini (Scientific Coordinator), Luisa Collina (Project Manager), Andrea Tartaglia, Gennaro Postiglione, Roberto Rizzi, Francesco Vitola, Maria Teresa Gullace, Ivano Ciceri.

¹¹Off Campus “Il cantiere per le periferie” is promoted by Polisocial, the Politecnico di Milano’s social responsibility program. The initiative is coordinated by Gabriele Pasqui, Francesca Cognetti, and Ida Castelnuovo. Through this project, for the first time in Italy, the university tries to investigate the double benefit that follows its presence within the urban context: both in terms of didactic methods enhancement—due to the closer relationships between teaching activities and local territories—and opportunities for researching and experimenting activities. The continuing legacy of this activity in the urban contexts represents a starting point for a social and physical requalification of the urban environment. Off Campus has a duration of 3 years and is going to be concentrated in 4 focus areas, corresponding to an equal number of actions and thematic areas: (1) Observatory of Dwelling and Urban Periphery, Abbiati Street—San Siro District; (2) Observatory of Student Housing: Isaac Newton Residence—Gallaratese District; (3) Observatory of Re-Activation of the Municipal Market in Monza Avenue—Nolo District; (4) Dwelling Urban Periphery, Rizzoli Street—Crescenzago District.



Fig. 4 Students of Politecnico di Milano hosted in the “Isaac Newton Student Residence”

An important moment for the research took place on May 16, 2019, during the conference “Living and Dwelling University. A critical view of student housing in Italy,” promoted by the ABC Department with the scientific involvement of the Dastu Department, ATE—Area Tecnico Edilizia, and Sevizio Residenze of the Politecnico di Milano.

The national conference was aimed at developing a critical balance of the law 338/2000 and the following procedures, focusing on the new role of student housing as a driving factor for the renewal of academic training courses, for attracting private and public investments to build and manage new structures, for experimenting new methods and procedures in architectural project, for fostering innovative and interactive practices involving students and local population.

The conference represented an important moment for favoring a dialogue among stakeholders, professionals, architects, political representatives, and academical researchers, which will follow a publication of the proceedings. Furthermore, the conference was an opportunity for launching the “Observatory of student housing of the Politecnico di Milano,” with the purpose of monitoring the student housing situation in Lombardy, strengthening competences and skills for the management, design, administration, and governance of the structures.

4 Student Housing as a Community Hub

The research carried out and the open perspectives clearly demonstrate the potential of student housing as a privileged field for the construction of Community hubs able to provide spaces and furniture to local people as well as social support to the population by young students with high educational profile and specific linguistic, technical, and digital skills.

Community hubs are public spaces able to bring together community agencies and neighborhood groups, offering a range of activities, programs, and services referred to the specific needs of the local population. They encourage social gatherings, improving the use of public spaces, embracing multiple services under one roof. Among the others, Community hubs can include health services, education, and employment amenities, childcare and sports facilities, social, cultural, and recreational spaces (Bagnoli et al. 2019). Community hubs foster the integration of local population, helping to put in relation people who speak the same language, with similar cultural backgrounds (Sousa 2013; Brotsky et al. 2019).

This gives the interpretation of student housing a double meaning, considering it on the one hand as “hardware”—a physical place able to provide innovative spaces and facilities to citizens—on the other hand as “software”—a social environment able to interact with the multicultural tendencies of a contemporary metropolis. Hardware and software become the new tools for generating integration, cohesion, inclusion and new human and social capital.

In conclusion, the research has opened an innovative interpretation of student housing, as a strategic field for promoting sociocultural regeneration of urban environments, triggering virtuous interactions among citizens—in particular among the more vulnerable groups such as the elderly, differently abled, children without access to a decent education, immigrants, and second generations of immigrant families—and fostering accountability in students, favoring their empowerment in urban life and their involvement in active citizenship.

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