

Adaptive Reuse for Collective Spaces in Modern Neighborhoods

Milena Farina

Università degli Studi Roma Tre - Dipartimento di Architettura, Roma, Italia,
milena.farina@uniroma3.it

Abstract

The provision of collective spaces within walking distance is particularly widespread and articulated in modern neighborhoods, especially in projects carried out according to procedures and laws reserved for affordable and social housing. These neighborhoods present, on the one hand, well-developed systems of common open spaces and, on the other, a wealth of facilities originally designed to host community services, which testifies to the importance of a public city project especially since the Second World War. Despite its potential, the public heritage of collective spaces in modern neighborhoods is often in a state of degradation, underuse or complete abandonment. On the other hand, the most marginal modern neighborhoods express a need for sharing spaces and services that is manifested in the experimentation of alternative forms of sociality and the provision of informal welfare, through the reappropriation of abandoned structures recovered from the heritage left behind by the public city. The “PRIN” research underway at the Department of Architecture of the Roma Tre University experiments with strategies for the regeneration and adaptive reuse of abandoned collective spaces in modern neighborhoods, bringing together the needs of local communities expressed by associations active in the area and their institutional representatives with those of public entities that manage the heritage. Adaptive reuse strategies are also being explored in a project to set up a communal space in a public housing neighborhood, shared with the community of residents: a seating system with a wooden shade canopy, which involves the use of materials from other installations through processes that preserve and enhance their grain, texture, density, consistency and color. Following the logic of adaptive reuse, the memory of its transformations remains inscribed within the material.

Keywords: Modern Neighborhoods, Collective Spaces, Upcycling

Introduction

The provision of communal spaces in modern neighborhoods is a crucial resource for their consistency and structure, particularly significant in post-war affordable and social housing projects. These places feature, on the one hand, complex systems of communal open spaces and, on the other, a wealth of facilities designed to host community services. The consistency of this heritage testifies to the importance of a public city project that has invested inhabitants with increasingly high expectations in terms of self-management and participation in community life (Di Biagi 2006; Mingotto Tattara 2023). The political and

planning culture of the 1960s and 1970s proved incapable of interpreting the emergence of an opposite housing culture with markedly individualistic values (Costa 1975; Secchi 1984). It is no coincidence that this public city project based on community ideals has essentially failed in its assumptions: despite its potential, the public heritage of collective spaces in modern neighborhoods is often in a state of decay, underuse or complete abandonment.

Despite the frustration of their collective vocation, the most marginal modern neighborhoods express a need to share spaces and services, which manifests itself in the experimentation with alternative forms of sociality and informal welfare, through the reappropriation of abandoned structures recovered from the heritage left behind by the public city (Bianchetti 2014; Gissara 2019).

Given the rich offer of collective spaces in modern neighborhoods, there is therefore a strong demand in these same areas for quality spaces and collective services close to home. A regeneration strategy can therefore create the conditions for the supply and demand for collective spaces to meet, bringing together the demands of local communities expressed by the organizations active in the area and their institutional representatives with those of the public entities that manage the heritage (Wassenberg 2013).

Informal experiences of reactivating spaces for collective use indicate the need to approach regeneration projects through processes that are rooted in the local area and spread out over time, involving increasingly active and aware communities on the one hand, and experimenting with spatial arrangements that consider different and changing needs on the other. Decades of experience in consultation with communities have shown that, for the actions undertaken to take root in the territories, it is essential to build a truly shared process, finding the conditions of opportunity and necessity for the project within the context (Cognetti 2020).

The Case of Torvecchia in Rome

Following these premises, the Prin 2022 research project “Places and stories of proximity. A methodology for the regeneration of collective spaces in modern neighborhoods” launched an experiment in the Torvecchia public housing neighborhood (Piano di Zona n. 74), on the north-western outskirts of the Capital¹. This is a project by the IACP of Rome (Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari), designed and built between 1978 and 1984 as part of the 1st PEEP (Piano per l’Edilizia Economica e Popolare), during a period of downsizing compared to the large-scale projects carried out a few years earlier with Gescal (Gestione Case per Lavoratori) funding (Fratlicelli, Rebecchini 1978). Lucio Passarelli and Pietro Barucci, authors of the Vigne Nuove and Laurentino 38 projects respectively, designed this 1,074-unit housing development together with Marcello Vittorini, demonstrating greater sensitivity to the size and articulation of spaces (Lenci 1983; Lenci 2006; Barucci 2008; Lenci 2009; Rossi 2012).

Although the project belongs to a transitional phase, some characteristics typical of modern neighborhoods remain, with the related critical issues: the spatial expansion resulting from the distancing of the buildings, which creates large common spaces that are difficult to manage; a composition of buildings as objects positioned on an abstract plane, which tends to create spaces that are difficult to recognize; the tendency to separate flows, with the presence of an elevated pedestrian walkway as an alternative to the driveway, which continuously generates separations and obstacles; the idea of detaching some buildings

from the ground, which in some places makes the basement level and its relationship with the surrounding spaces problematic; the provision of spaces intended for services that are isolated from the urban context, with problems of operation and management.

The presence of typical spatial situations and recurring critical issues in public neighborhoods built in the same years, combined with the absence of the extraordinary and radical character of the previous phase, makes this case study particularly significant and the results of the ongoing experiment more relevant.

The collective spaces present problems of management, conditions of degradation, abandonment or under-use, critical issues that can also be attributed to a lack of affection on the part of the resident community. The only spaces that express quality are those that have been privatized by the inhabitants in a more or less radical way, as they are the object of care and attention on the part of those who use them (Fig. 1). There is an apparent rejection of the public dimension of collective spaces, which does not seem to satisfy the community's need for sharing and socializing. The only exception is the senior citizens' centre, which is in premises originally intended for residents' services.

The most active organizations in the area, such as the senior citizens' centre and the neighborhood committee, have highlighted that there is a widespread need for spaces for meeting and socializing, and for services that go beyond commercial activities, despite the presence of large open spaces and even abandoned premises. Dialogue with residents, but also with representatives of local institutions and the public entity that owns the abandoned spaces intended for services (Ater, the former IACP), has been instrumental in identifying the critical issues related to the lack of use of these spaces.



Fig. 1. Outdoor spaces maintained by residents (Milena Farina, 2025)

On the one hand, there is the degradation and hostile nature of open spaces, partly due to the prohibitive conditions that arise in these spaces during the warmer seasons, exacerbated by the climate emergency, their large size and the lack of shaded seating areas.

As for the abandoned premises, the failure of commercial activities is mainly due to the isolation of the neighborhood, their location away from the existing main road where all the shops are concentrated, a condition of isolation that is recurrent in the social housing interventions of the 1970s. In this sense, the name “Bronx”, which has become established over the years to refer to the neighborhood, is a significant testimony to the marginalization that has characterized it from the outset, but which over the years has become a distinctive feature that the younger generations have adopted with pride as part of their identity.

With the acronym TVB—Torre Vecchia Bronx, the project aims to overturn the negative narrative associated with the neighborhood, promoting the affection and care that is already widespread among the inhabitants but not sufficiently expressed.

Regeneration Strategies. The Service System

The first regeneration strategy concerns the spaces in the neighborhood originally intended for community services, which were never activated or which over the years have lost their function, taking on other roles or remaining in a state of neglect (Fig. 2).

The action promoted as part of the research project involves the reactivation of two abandoned premises for the opening of a Proximity Laboratory “TVB PRO LAB”, as a strategy for regeneration that can be gradually extended to all the spaces originally intended for neighborhood services. This process has included identifying situations of abandonment, reaching an agreement with Ater for the use of the premises, and liaising with the neighborhood committee and Rome City Council’s 13th Municipality to activate services useful to the community. In this sense, the experiment involves a network of local associations that will take turns offering a diverse range of services for a period of one year. The possibility of setting up different activities in these spaces is facilitated by the flexible nature of the premises, already provided for in the original project, which allows for various configurations and uses to be envisaged.

Based on the response from the local community, at the end of the trial period, the most popular services that have become established and consolidated over time and have shown potential for autonomy will be confirmed. At the same time, the spaces will be assigned to one of the organizations closest to the local community, the Municipality or the Neighborhood Committee. The entity that takes over the management of the premises must ensure that they are used for public benefit, creating conditions for the rediscovery of the collective nature of this facility. The aim is to create the conditions for the provision of services to the local community to continue, to trigger a virtuous process of regeneration of abandoned, underused or misused spaces.

Regeneration Strategies. The Open Space System

The second action concerns the neighborhood’s open space system. In particular, the north-east courtyard, after decades of neglect and virtually non-existent maintenance of the sports fields, is in a state of widespread deterioration. The paving of the central fields and the paths parallel to the houses is disconnected, broken and overgrown with vegetation (Fig. 3). This large communal space is therefore characterized by a series of critical issues



Fig. 2. Closed shops on the ground floor of the houses (Milena Farina, 2025)

that limit its usability and social value. It is no coincidence that the north-east courtyard has been identified by local residents as a place where action could be taken, with a view to triggering more widespread regeneration. This is the first step in a process that involves community participation in the subsequent design and implementation phases.

The intervention stems from the need expressed by the community—and in particular by those who move less and therefore frequent its spaces more, such as the elderly, children and young people—to have a recognizable, welcoming and suitably shaded outdoor social space that can become a meeting point for those who live in and frequent the neighborhood. Based on these discussions and following a site visit accompanied by the neighborhood committee, the students of the optional course in Parametric Design Techniques formulated several project proposals. The design alternatives were discussed with residents in a public presentation organized at the Torrevecchia Senior Citizens' Centre, an initial opportunity for discussion with the community for whom the structure is intended, marked by participation that continued in the following weeks with various forms of commentary on the projects. Based on the suggestions gathered, a group of students developed a design idea, which is currently undergoing construction testing². The “Ombra TVB” project involves the construction of a wooden structure with a large canopy and a seating system covering an area of approximately 100 square metres, with the capacity to seat at least 300 people. The project is organized as an open device, capable of activating different uses of space, from the most spontaneous (resting, playing, meeting) to the most structured (associative activities, small neighborhood events, parties and outdoor workshops). The inclusion of the



Fig. 3. The north-east courtyard with its abandoned sports fields and uneven paving of the paths (Milena Farina, 2025)

structure in a central and strategic area of the courtyard, along one of its busiest pedestrian routes, ensures maximum accessibility and visibility, reinforcing its role as a catalyst for relationships (Fig. 4).

The research therefore experimented with a methodology of regeneration and adaptive recovery of existing spaces that involves ongoing work in the neighborhood and the involvement of citizens, representatives of local institutions and the entities that own the spaces. The involvement of the community will extend to the management phase of the structure through the activation of a collaboration agreement with one of the associations active in the area.

The wooden profiles used come partly from the dismantling of the structures of the “Festival des Cabanes 2024”, which is held every year in the gardens of the French Academy in Rome—Villa Medici, in line with contemporary requirements for sustainable design and reuse of materials. The profiles will be painted to ensure uniformity and facilitate maintenance.

The project is part of the Circular Architecture Program (PARC) of the Department of Architecture at Roma Tre University, bringing together students, lecturers, researchers, technicians and external partners from the worlds of industry and craftsmanship, as well as institutions and associations. As in the case of Torrecchia, each project arises from concrete opportunities and requests, the availability of materials and spaces, and the commitment of social resources active in all phases of the process: from the recovery of

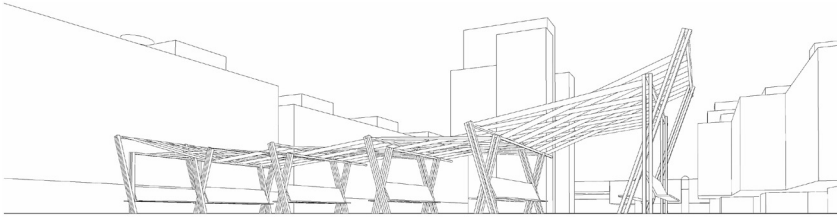


Fig. 4. The “Ombra TVB” project in the north-east courtyard with the towers in the background (PARC project team, 2025)

materials to the management of spaces to the actual construction of the works through participatory building experiences involving students and communities.

The PARC program aims to bring the themes of circular economy and sustainable resource management into the world of design, creating projects that involve the recovery of materials from other installations. Recovered materials are used either in their entirety or in part, giving them an architectural and expressive interpretation through processes that preserve and enhance their grain, texture, density, consistency and color.

Conclusions

The experiment underway in Torrevicchia focuses on two locations that embody different aspects of collective spaces in modern neighbourhoods: a portion of the common open spaces and part of the structures originally designed to house community services. The actions undertaken are intended to trigger a broader and more widespread process of regeneration and adaptive reuse, which can involve the entire system of collective spaces in the neighbourhood, reaffirming the public vocation of neighbourhoods such as this one.

The logic of adaptive reuse is also applied in another dimension, namely the process of recovering materials already used in other projects for the construction of a new structure. Working on the surface of the components, the memory of their transformations remains inscribed in the material.

Notes

1. PNRR - M4C2 - I1.1 - PRIN 2022 - settore ERC SH7 - 2022XZZYA5 - CUP F53D23005740006 - funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU. Torrevicchia was chosen in particular as a case study by the Research Unit of the Department of Architecture - Roma Tre University, composed of Milena Farina (PI and UR manager), Valerio Palmieri, Flavio Graviglia, Cecilia Rosa and Flavia Sinibaldi;

2. “Ombra TVB” is the result of a collaboration between the PRIN 2022 research project “Places and Stories of Proximity. A Methodology for the Regeneration of Collective Spaces in Modern Neighborhoods”, the Parametric Design Techniques course (prof. Stefano Converso), and the LAMP - Models and Prototypes Laboratory, as part of the Circular Architecture Program (PARC) of the

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