

What architecture for the middle-class?

On the cover of this Spring 2022 Special Issue of *Cidades, Comunidades e Territórios*, we find a picture of a billboard that reads: *What architecture for the middle-class?*¹ Throughout June 2021, this was one out of four question-like provocations placed nearby University Institute of Lisbon (Iscte). Under the R&D project “Middle-Class Mass Housing (MCMH) in Europe, Africa and Asia”², Iscte hosted the related International Conference “Optimistic Suburbia 2 – Middle-Class Mass Housing Complexes” (16-18 June 2021)³. Other questions were posed, not only on the billboards but also in two of the most read Portuguese newspapers a few days before the Conference to which this Special Issue refers. A short film, or teaser⁴, disclosed online also addressed these issues: *Who was the architect who designed your apartment? Is a building worse than a house? Are the peripheries dormitories for the middle-class?* These propositions catalysed some of the subsequent discussion on the case studies of MCMH project – shown and debated during the Conference. The international contribution nevertheless reached far more subsidiary debates under the MCMH ‘umbrella’ topic. This Special Issue is a small sample of the work produced by a few researchers⁵ who participated with their specific expertise. It can be rightly said that it is a true sample. At the Conference, there were 11 presenting sessions, from which 6 are represented in this Issue in odd numbers: sessions 1, 3, 5, 7 and 11 all have one article. Thus, the texts constitute good examples of the prepared and discussed work.

Tatiana Knoroz, this issue’s first author, participated in session 1, chaired by Gaia Caramellino and Filippo De Pieri. This session was entitled “Writing the History of Post-war Housing Complexes and Neighbourhoods. A Take on Research Strategies and Methodologies”. Knoroz, in her article “Devicology: Expanding fieldwork possibilities for architectural observations in inhabited interiors. The case of Japanese post-war mass housing”, introduces us to the Japanese *danchi* (Japanese mass housing from the 1960s), namely its interiors. *Devicology* (in homage to Wajiro Kon’s “Modernology”) is the key word that Knoroz proposes for her methodological analysis of this typology. Based on her personal knowledge of the Russian *Khrushchyovka* – a low-cost, concrete-panelled or brick three- to five-storied apartment building which was developed in the Soviet Union during the early 1960s –, Knoroz takes on a research strategy based on tow fieldtrips and local survey to *Wakamiya danchi*, Japan. With the *danchi* history as background, Tatiana analyses today’s *Wakamiya* living standards, making a thorough examination of the objects and interior occupation of some spaces. Surprisingly, Tatiana comes across what she calls a “fieldwork problem”, namely the fact that the inhabitants are currently resigned to their modes of living. In conclusion, Tatiana presents “Devicology as a method for categorisation and analysis of interior photographic data and other field observations, bypassing the at times subjective and inconsistent nature of verbal information collected during interviews.”

Eveline Althaus and Liv Christensen present the following article, “Community centres in increasingly diverse neighbourhoods: policies and practices of community building in post-war housing estates in Switzerland”, developed for session 3. This session, coordinated by Marie Glaser and Ellen Braae, discussed “Publicness in

¹ In Portuguese: “Que arquitetura para a classe-média?”

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³ See <https://www.optimisticsuburbia2.com/>. A first Optimistic Suburbia Conference was held at the same institution on 20-22 May 2015. See <https://optimisticsuburbia.wixsite.com/ingles>.

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KpiYSUGoNE&t=1s>

⁵ From a total of 137 participants, 61 came to Lisbon to engage in face-to-face Conference activities. The Conference had a hybrid format since 2021 was a yet pandemic year.

middle-class large housing complexes as a new way to examine the premises of cultural encounters and social integration”. In their text, Althaus and Christensen address the issue of buildings’ occupancy change over time and the challenges this phenomenon entails. The specific research presented here is based on a larger investigation which focuses on two housing estates in Switzerland that evoke the country’s post-war constructions boom: the *Telli*, in Aarau, and the *Tscharnergut*, in Bern. These two examples were meticulously studied based on “document analysis of policy relevant papers, field observations, mapping and in-depth interviews with various local stakeholders”. The text is firstly framed by a historical contextualization which refers to the estates’ original plans (going back to half a century before) and their present ill reputation. Then, within several points, it presents a set of “policies and practices of community building and the role of community centres” comparing it to de case studies. The conclusion offers an overall synthesis of the authors’ view on community building, with assertions like: “Today, city authorities and property owners in *Telli* and *Tscharnergut* recognise that the long-term commitment of the community centres creates considerable added value to the neighbourhoods and the properties.”

Nicole De Togni is this Special Issue’s next author, with her article “The tool of planning agreements: Milan at the core of an underexplored reading of the post-war Italian cities between the public and private sectors”. This text was the basis of her presentation in session 5, chaired by Filipa Fiúza, named “Middle-Class Mass Housing: public/private joint-ventures”. De Togni presents a text about the designated Italian so-called planning agreements: “long-standing arrangements between the public administration and public or private actors, aiming at organizing and disciplining expertise and goods for planning purposes” that were originally officious but legally validated in 1967. These agreements, which emerged from the post-war period, are analysed as “underexplored tools of Italian planning”, offering a “privileged lens to observe tools and practices, professional and administrative networks, demands for social emancipation and renewal of planning processes, at the centre of a complex system of actors, habits, disciplinary and critical positions”. The city of Milan – the “fastest growing real estate market in Italy” – is particularly observed, framing the presented case of *Piazza della Repubblica* tower, an upper-middle-class mixed residential and office building constructed in the city centre by Giovanni Muzio. Here, the planning agreement is applied and, though criticized (namely by Gian Antonio Bernasconi in *Casabella*, in 1969), comes to life, proposing “a new reading of planning agreements as a source for architectural and planning research”.

Audrey Courbebaisse and Gérald Ledent also examine a planning tool for a reference European city. In their article “From an imagined community to genuine communities: Birth and development of Etrimo Apartment Buildings in Brussels, 1950–2020”, presented in Laurence Heindryckx and Tom Broes’ session 7 – “The Imagined Community of Middle-Class Mass Housing” – the authors delve into the role of the real estate developer Etrimo (*Société d’études et de réalisations immobilières*), in building an idealised community of inhabitants – in this case by Jean-Florian Collin, the company’s founder, who stands out among his peers. They begin by explaining the origins of this venture, the programme (originally designated for middle-class returnees from the Congo), the associated numbers (14 000 dwellings), and other contextualising factors, and then define three case studies. The body of the text is based on “qualitative research, conducted at the crossroads where architecture meets the social sciences”. Based on an analysis of archival material, notably commercial brochures, but also interviews and on-site observations, Courbebaisse and Ledent embark on a comparative study of Collin’s “idealistic notion of the nuclear family” (as a “sum of individuals”) and today’s “genuine communities”, acknowledging the recognition of an “Etrimo identity”, which includes, as characteristics, peaceful outdoor spaces and lively common (indoor) rooms. Thus the “capacity of Etrimo (...) to build and support a community of inhabitants” is inferred.

Carlos Machado e Moura is the following author, who presented his work at session 9, chaired by Maria Rita Pais, with the title “Inhabiting Suburbia: art (registers) of living”. In this issue of *Cidades*, his article “What makes mass housing representations so different, so appealing? The French grands ensembles in comic-strip form” proposes to address architecture not as a scenario, but as a narrative object, subject to “imageries and representations”. His text explains how in France, the “country of *bande dessinée* and the crisis of the *banlieues*”, the practice of comics developed most vigorously, especially during a period in which the *grands ensembles*, which were in good condition in the first place, began to suffer a pronounced decadence. From the 1973 oil crisis on, those that stood designated to the middle-class dealt with the effort to mix diverse ethnicities (*mixité*) and were occupied by social housing (which gave rise to the *banlieues*). In an enlightening text, the author affirms that “finally, in the 1980s, these neighbourhoods faced a deep crisis, becoming subject to social segregation” and that, from the 1970s until

today, comics have mirrored this growing transformation. Thus, although its title is borrowed from the English pop artist Richard Hamilton's 1956 work "Just what is it that makes today's home's so different, so appealing?", the real 'appeal' here are the impressive images that the text presents, particularly those of the "humour and mockery", the "overcharge", the "dramatic scenes loaded with brutality and gore". As "portrait(s) of social reality", comics depict the "life in (...) problematic suburb(s)". Having said this, we believe there is some optimism in Machado e Moura's words when, citing René Boer, he says "dystopic worlds always proved to be more productive than any utopian urban systems".

Diego Inglez de Souza offers us "The history of the Cité Balzac and the vicious circle of social housing", an investigation the author presented in Alessandra Como and Luisa Smeragliuolo Perrotta's session 11, named "Demolition vs Renovation: an open question with regard to Middle-Class Mass Housing in the contemporary city". Souza begins by introducing us to *Cité Balzac*, "a housing complex built in the 1960s in Vitry-sur-Seine, an emblematic 'red suburb' in the south of Paris", posing the hypothesis that this particular *grand ensemble* describes "a perfect cycle, showing the limits and contradictions of social housing as a modern utopia, its crisis and contemporary conditions". Therefore, this text accesses both a historical survey (that contemplates the modernist doctrine), and a research question that relates to the current housing status. Originally designed for the middle-class, "after some years of pacific coexistence (...), the white and French (...) started to leave the complex", which was possible because of the "accumulated savings" during the *Trentes Glorieuses*. Discrimination and bias occupied the blocks, creating the so-called "vicious circle of social housing".

Alberto Reaes Pinto's essay on prefabrication comes in the sequence of the six papers selected from the odd sessions of the "Optimistic Suburbia 2" Conference. "Total heavy prefabrication: Santo António dos Cavaleiros (SAC) and Quinta do Morgado (QM). Overview of the building process, exterior panel pathologies and a study for their rehabilitation" addresses the most original construction problem posed in Portugal in the 1960s. Reaes Pinto, invited to the Conference by João Cardim, and also a special guest of this Spring Issue, presents in this text a brief explanation of the technical aspects and a retrospective balance of the positive and negative aspects of the application of the different prefabrication possibilities through shared images and data on two cases that he personally supervised in the metropolitan area of Lisbon, Portugal (both built by the company ICESA). The relationship between the post-war Central European period and the same period in the Portuguese context (namely the 1960s) in terms of housing demands should be noted; the neutral countries also 'rebuilt' their economy, with widespread technological development. The author even considers that the period up to the 1973 oil crisis was a "period of quantity", i.e. of massification, contrasting with a "period of quality", from 1974 onwards, when "with a reduction of the building shortage, the building site became smaller, with fewer dwellings and greater complexity in terms of the organisation of space".

This construction duality pre- and post-1973 crisis is intriguing. While, for prefabrication, the 1980s meant the opening to a greater qualification, for the larger-scale projects carried out *in situ*, this period implied a greater decline. This contradiction becomes visible if we confront all articles in this Special Issue. On the other hand, there is no doubt that all of them – whose case studies originate in Japan, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, France or Portugal – share references of great significance. First, the theme of post-war housing; but also the idea of the inhabitant and part of a social class. In our memory, the question still remains: *What architecture for the middle-class?* to which we may add: *Who is the inhabitant of a certain dwelling? What does he aspire to?* Several articles have tried to understand what communities are like today – both from a disciplinary point of view (by analysing studies) and from an empirical point of view (through comics, e.g.). Indeed, *media* is fundamental for fostering the debate. The day we write this, the *Washington Post* informs that "Once an affluent suburb, Moshchun is now an emblem of Ukrainian resistance"⁶. We want to sustain a spirit of optimism, of resistance. So let us remind ourselves of the title of this Conference – "Optimistic Suburbia" – and keep in mind that all optimism requires a certain amount of effort. However diverse the contexts, the case studies, the methodological approaches, the points of view, this Special Issue is one story – the story of a war reconstruction. Let us remember that this is not a time for celebration.

⁶ Article by [Sudarsan Raghavan](#), [Jon Gerberg](#) and Heidi Levine. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/30/ukraine-frontline-town-military-routs-russians/>

But the time will come for new *Trentes Glorieuses*, and then we will need the sensibility of the authors presented here.

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