

Edited by
Maurizio Bergamaschi

The multidimensional housing deprivation

Local dynamics
of inequality, policies
and challenges for the future



SOCIOLOGIA DEL TERRITORIO

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Genoa's Biscione from the 1960s until today. From a stigmatised neighbourhood to a place where "it is nice to live"

by *Francesco Gastaldi, Federico Camerin*¹

Introduction

This research explains the connection between the migration processes after 1945 and housing issue in the Italian city of Genoa. In particular, we deepen the experience of the Ina-casa Forte Quezzi neighbourhood in Genoa - the so-called "Biscione"- from its construction in the 1960s until today and address the main urban and social changes occurred over time.

Following WWII western Europe faced critical housing shortages, brought about by destruction of war years, as well as high marriage rates and rapid expansion of urban population (such as population migration from the countryside to urban areas) and incomes. Consequently, the mass provision of social rental housing units represented the primary means for resolving housing welfare issues across much of western European governments (Wendt, 1962; Diefendorf, 1989).

In Italy, the State was the economic programmer for housing sector through the experience of the so-called "Ina-casa plan"². This plan was regarded as a sort of Keynesian mechanism for the Italian economic development following the Christian Democratic party motto «not all proletari-

¹ Francesco Gastaldi, Iuav University of Venice; Federico Camerin, researcher Margarita Salas, Universidad UVA de Valladolid-Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM), Grupo de Investigación en Arquitectura, Urbanismo y Sostenibilidad (GIAU+S), Valladolid-Madrid. This work is the result of the strict collaboration between the authors. Sections 3, 4 and conclusion are attributed to Francesco Gastaldi, introduction, 2 and 5 to Federico Camerin and section 1 to both Authors. Federico Camerin has participated as co-author within the research project "Urban Regeneration as a new version of Urban Renewal Programmes. Achievements and failures". This project is co-funded by the Spanish Ministry of Universities in the framework of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, by the European Union - NextGenerationEU and by the Universidad de Valladolid.

² Ina stands for *Istituto nazionale delle assicurazioni* (national institute for insurance).

ans, but all owners» (Pombeni, 1979, p. 149). The national housing plan was launched by the Ministry of labour and social welfare Amintore Fafani in 1949 on the basis of three regulations: the Law no. 43 of 28th February 1949; the Regulations of the Presidential Decree no. 340 of 22nd June 1949, and the Regulations of Presidential Decree no. 436 of 4th July 1949 (Astengo, 1951; Istituto Luigi Sturzo, 2002). This plan aimed at boosting employment through the building of social housing neighbourhood units according to a series of instructions contained in specific Modernism-based manuals (Vv.Aa., 1953; Campomolla, Vittorini, 2003), but without any connection with the implementation of the Italian Town Planning Law no. 1150 of 17th August 1942. The Ina-casa plan lasted 14 years and expired in 1963, for a total expenditure of 936 billion Italian Liras. The main result of this policies were the opening of approximately 20,000 construction sites, the employment of 41,000 workers per year in the building sector, and new 355,000 housing units (Beretta Anguissola, 1963). The impacts of the plan, however, were negative in terms of living condition due to insufficient amenities and public equipment provided to the social housing neighbourhoods. Despite this, Ina-casa plan had been claimed to furnish better social housing neighbourhoods than the successive experiences of state-led interventions in the field of social housing (Acocella, 1980, pp. 30-33, 77-113, 183-197; Di Biagi, 2001; Ginsborg 1989, Sotgia, 2012).

The causes of the Ina-casa plan's negative impacts found their *raison d'être* in the post-WWII reconstruction phase (Campos Venuti, 1993a, pp. 7-16). During this period real estate market forces - builders, contractors, entrepreneurs, landowners and real estate companies - drove the urban development patterns of the Italian cities and strongly influenced national and local decision-making process. Speculative projects based on massive waves of urbanisation without paying particular attention to improving the living condition of citizens (Campos Venuti, 1967) made uglier and less inhabitable the Italian cities (Cederna, 1956; De Lucia, 1992). The main results of this urban development period were the displacement of low-income classes out of the historic centres, the vertiginous increase in the urban rent of central areas for the emergent middle class and the growing city tertiarisation (Campos Venuti, 1993b). In addition, the economic gap between Southern and Northern Italy pushed an enormous displacement of people towards the north-western industrial triangle enclosed by the cities of Genoa, Milan and Turin, usually being housed in new Ina-casa neighbourhood units (Ascoli, 1979). The peripheral social housing neighbourhoods dealt thus with the arrival of millions both from the country and the South, acting as a trigger for the extensive urbanisation (Indovina, 1972; Cervellati, 1976).

1. Methodology

Our work comprises seven sections. In the Introduction we provide the explanation of the post-WWII national context in terms of social housing. The third section is dedicated to the migratory process occurred in Genoa and the social housing needs after 1945. The fourth section deals with the making process of the Biscione in relation to Genoa's urban development patterns. The fifth section reviews the recent studies released on the Biscione and the sixth section reports the results of the questionnaire to the Biscione's residents. Eventually, the conclusion summarises the findings of the inquiry and delineate the research gap to fill in the next future.

The methodology relies on two phases. First, the literature review of the Genoa's social housing issues based on archival research carried out at both Genoa's City Council and Regional territorial building company³ headquarters. Second, a specific fieldwork with the use of questionnaires filled in by the Biscione's residents in the early 2021. Two are the main objectives of this work. On the one hand, to discover the main features of the Biscione projects in terms of architectural, urban planning and social aspects. On the other hand, to partially fill the lack of knowledge about the Genoa's Biscione making process and understand the metamorphosis of this social-housing neighbourhood over the decades.

2. Migratory processes and the housing question in the post-WWII Genoa

As a pillar of the industrial triangle, Genoa attracted many citizens after 1945 even though their accommodation was utterly unsatisfactory. According to the housing inquiry commissioned by the Genoa City Council's Social and Labour Studies Office to the sociologist Luciano Cavalli (1957, 1964), in the early 1950s about 5,600 people lived in improper and neglected flats, sometimes shared by several families.

This inquiry found that many immigrants were living in shacks, ruins, basements and bombed-out buildings within the historic centre (around 1,400). These immigrants occupied all the available space: attics, basements and even houses destined for demolition in extremely precarious economic and hygienic conditions (Cavalli, 1964, pp. 68, 70, 72). New Genoa's inhabitants came from the Southern Italy - mainly from Calabria,

³ The so-called Arte - Azienda regionale territoriale per l'edilizia.

Sicily and Sardinia regions -, the central Apennine hinterland, the lower Piedmont and many immigrants were refugees from Venezia Giulia and the former Italian colonies (Eritrea, Yugoslavia, Libya and Somalia).

Cavalli's inquiry showed that the 53% of immigrants in Genoa in the period 1952-1956 were born in northern Italy and only 29% came from southern and insular Italy. A total of 391 families comprising 1,391 people were living in ruins and wartime ruins on which they have built wooden and metal huts, being the 25% of population living in Genoa's slums. The inquiry proved that almost all of them were not Genoese, but southern immigrants arrived in the post-WWII period. They housed in slums mainly for sociological and cultural integration reasons. First, a total of 67% of southern heads of households could not rent real houses because they were too expensive. Second, southern immigrants were often poorly integrated or even rejected by the indigenous population and therefore they tended to have social relations only within them. Third, and consequently, even when immigrants can afford renting a house, they remained in the slums.

The social exclusion dynamics involving southern immigrants occurred while Genoa was developing and modernising into a metropolis reaching an all-time high of 848,121 residents on 31st December 1965. In this context, the attempt to overcome the existing social precariousness relied on the building of new social-housing neighbourhoods based on the Ina-casa plan. In 1966, the approval of the detailed plan - "piano particolareggiato d'esecuzione" in Italian - for Via Madre di Dio led to the destruction of an entire district to make way for a business centre. The urban renewal operation consequently expelled the existing population that was partially relocated to the new social housing interventions. The most relevant social housing units during the post-WWII period were the 1950-53 Bernabò-Brea, the 1953 Mura degli Angeli, the 1950-54 Porta degli Angeli, and the mid-1960s Forte Quezzi neighbourhoods. These interventions provided real solutions for housing low-income classes and catalysed the city growth towards unbuilt areas (Moriconi, Rosadini, 2004, p. 37).

3. The Ina-casa Forte Quezzi neighbourhood in Genoa ("*Biscione*")

The Ina-casa Forte Quezzi neighbourhood is known as "*Biscione*" due to its shape resembling a large grass snake. The project was led and designed by architects Luigi Carlo Daneri and Eugenio Fuselli and carried out as part of the second seven-year period of the Ina-casa plan. This residential settlement consisted of about 850 flats arranged in three three-storey and

two six-storey long buildings⁴. This social-housing neighbourhood covered approximately 33 hectares of greenfield hills of the Bisagno river valley, being located in the Genoa's northern periphery bordering Marassi district. The intervention aimed at accommodating the largest number of poor people with precarious housing conditions in low-cost land (Patrone, 1982). Moreover, this project marked a pivotal way to evaluate both the insertion of new buildings in a fragile orographic conditions like the Bisagno river valley's morphology and the landscape perspective and perception of the snake-shaped buildings (Porcile, 2018, p. 131). Eugenio Fuselli, a Genoese urban planner working at that time at the Faculty of Engineering and one of the Biscione designers, explained in the essay *The longer housing - "La casa più lunga"* in Italian - the relationship of the Biscione with the existing landscape (Fuselli, 1968). He highlighted the relevance of the buildings' shape and put emphasis on the fact all the buildings curve naturally into the folds of the basin and the reliefs: whichever way one may look at them, they seemed to be much shorter than they really were. This was demonstrated by the comparison he made with Ratti Fortress, situated in the background of Genoa at a short distance from Quezzi. Ratti Fortress seemed much longer than Quezzi Fortress, even though it is shorter, because it is an entirely rectilinear body.

The neighbourhood was designed between 1956 and 1957 and built between 1960 and 1968 - being managed from 1963 by Ges.ca.l.⁵ - and accommodated approximately 4,500 people (Sirtori, 2013, p. 93). The social housing unit was functionally autonomous and supposed to provide the following amenities and services: a neighbourhood centre, a market, a nursery and primary school, a church, sports facilities, entertainment halls, and green spaces⁶.

A great collective euphoria pushed ahead the building of these neighbourhoods for three main reasons. First, the large amount of public financing allowed the realisation of important works in a city totally unprepared to receive such a massive influx of people as stated by Cavalli's inquiries (1957 and 1964). The need to accommodate large number of people and the influence of Modern Movement theories were behind the large size of these

⁴ The buildings were named "A", "B", "C", "D" and "E".

⁵ The 1963-to-1973 Ges.ca.l. - the acronym stands for "Gestione case per i lavoratori" - was the state entity intended for the workers' housing management.

⁶ Nevertheless, not all these features were provided once finished the buildings works in 1968. The community centre was built in the early 1980s on the site of a building that had partially collapsed during the catastrophic flood of 7-8 October 1970. The school was built in the 1990s and the church was inaugurated only in 1997 in the place envisaged by architect Daneri, but the latter was built with a different architectural style.

interventions. The idea of concentrating thousands of people in a single container derived indeed from the architectural visions of Daneri's ideal references, especially Le Corbusier's Plan Obus in Algiers (Sirtori, 2013, p. 97; Paone, 2009, p. 26).

Second, the building of the Biscione⁷ should be contextualised also in the euphoria the post-war "economic miracle" (Ornati, 1963), a season of growth towards the logics of an unlimited development in which Genoa was a relevant pillar. In the 1960s the city did not yet enter into the crisis that would later affect the more traditional economic sectors, largely linked to the Italian state holdings (Doria, 1997). During the boom period, the city's economic situation was particularly prosperous: the port was at the core of the Mediterranean trades, and the metalworking, steel and ship-building industries were booming thanks to substantial investments by Iri⁸.

Third, this period underwent to a huge real estate speculation on the Liguria coast overwhelmed by the boom in mass tourism that required the construction of second homes. It was a speculation also in terms of housing in the city. In the light of the spending limits for acquiring the availability of the areas to develop the Ina-casa plan, the roads leading to the public housing estates on the hills had boosted the wild development of large blocks of flats, as it happened in the southern surroundings of the Biscione (Gabrielli, 1971, p. 11-15)⁹ (see Fig. 1).

Bruno Gabrielli addressed the issues of the city expansion of that period, being mostly related to the uncontrolled residential booms and the underestimation of the needs in terms of public amenities and facilities (Gabrielli, 1963, 1969, 1971 and 1978). The first comprehensive town planning tool, the 1959 Urban development plan - *Piano regolatore generale* -, was blamed to be ineffective in managing the waves of migration and the socio-cultural and economic transformations related to the massive urbanisation process. In his writings, Bruno Gabrielli analytically highlighted the many mistakes and missed opportunities for creating a healthier and more liveable city, as well as the contradictions of a tumultuous urban development. The implementation of the 1959 Urban development plan (Comune di Genova, 1959) resulted in a low quality of life in the suburbs, a lack of space for leisure and sport, a weak coordination between municipal policies and port

⁷ See Bonelli (1959) and Daneri (1959) for a debate in the magazine *L'architettura, croniche e storia*.

⁸ The Institute for the industrial reconstruction - *Istituto per la ricostruzione industriale* in Italian - was created in 1933 and dismissed in 2000 (Saraceno, 1953).

⁹ Urban planner that have dealt with the Genoa's urban development in the second half of the 20th century. He was also Emeritus Professor at the local University and town planning councillor between 1997 and 2006 (Gastaldi, Storchi, 2018).

development choices, and a coexistence between industrial activities and housing. In the ever-growing city, most of the new buildings were erected where they should not be, i.e. on the banks of streams and even on steep and landslide-prone terrain. The lack of adequate runoff led consequently several Genoa's rivers to burst their banks and have disastrous consequences in the 1970 flood (Gabrielli, 1971). The 1959 Urban development plan was considered an inadequate tool for planning the city development in the early 1960s, but the City Council adopted the modification of the new plan only in 1976, being successively approved by Liguria Region only in 1980.

Fig. 1 - The result of the uncontrolled real estate development in the Biscione surroundings. Large condominiums are located in the southern part of the Biscione's building E



Source: photo by F. Gastaldi (2021)

4. The Biscione today. Towards the rediscovering of an underestimated neighbourhood?

The need of an in-depth inquiry on the current state of the Biscione neighbourhood relies on the findings of a number of studies published in the last 20 years along with the national interdisciplinary workshop “Bor-

derline” carried out in 2013 (Bertagna, Giberti, 2015). The main findings that propelled a new in-depth inquiry on Biscione are the following.

First, the existence of a comfortable built environment where social life is possible. More than 10 years ago, Bucci and Lucchini (2010, p. 52) claimed that «here lies the secret of Forte Quezzi. In spite of the most recent real estate speculation and the services never completed, the five residential units do not constitute a peripheral enclave that turns its back on the historic centre. Being accurately integrated in the pre-existing landscape, the Biscione neighbourhood constitutes a possible new way of living in Genoa»¹⁰. According to Porcile (2018), the relationship between the Biscione and its surroundings is the result of very precise design choices. The qualities of the original project for housing the poor, mostly the peculiar panoramic relationship with the landscape, ended up in a liveable place (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 - A panoramic view of the Biscione’s building A towards the city centre and the sea



Source: photo by F. Gastaldi (2021)

Second, this neighbourhood changed over time the bad reputation that still accompanies other social housing units in Genoa, especially those built

¹⁰ Translated from Italian to English by the Authors.

in the 1980s, such as Pegli 3 neighbourhood. However, it is true that the delays in the implementation of a number of public amenities and equipment - plus the absence of many of the pedestrian paths that would have made the Biscione surrounding green areas a real urban park - contributed to aggravate existing social issues and the gradual abandonment by the residents (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 - The relationship between the Biscione's building E and the surrounding green spaces



Source: photo by F. Gastaldi (2021)

As to social issues, petty crime was widespread in the 1980s and Biscione was associated with negative connotations like other large social housing neighbourhoods. As to the depopulation, Biscione's inhabitants decreased from 3,800 in the early 1970s to 2,700 in the 1990s, and nowadays the residents are presumably 2,000. Despite this, the survey "Empowerment/cantiere Italia" (Scotini, 2004) discovered that the Biscione's inhabitants had a good perception of the social environment, approximately 70% of the flats were owned by the residents, and the presence of immigrants was very small but well integrated with the rest of the community. In an interview with the president of the Bassa Val Bisagno Borough Massimo Fer-

rante¹¹, the Biscione turned out to be rediscovered by the children and grandchildren of the original residents. Their life choice was settling in the neighbourhood and this intergenerational change has gradually developed a strong sense of belonging and community along with a higher presence of young families than in other sectors of the city. These assumptions are not confirmed by nor public inquiry by local authorities or academic studies. The lack of knowledge about the changes occurring in the area arise many questions around these social changes and the apparent reconfiguration of the Biscione's identity if compared to the 1980s and to other Genoa's social-housing neighbourhoods.

5. The inquiry

A first step towards a deeper understanding of the current social situation in the Biscione was carried out with the help of the local cooperative "Coop Il Biscione"¹² in March 2021. We conducted an empirical research on the basis of an online survey that Coop Il Biscione helped us to submit to 40 residents of the Biscione (Tab. 1)¹³. The 40 residents were asked to answer "Yes" (Y), "No" (N) or "I don't know" (D-K) to the following questions:

1. do you find any inequalities and discrimination in finding a proper housing unit in the municipality of Genoa?
2. Do you find any inequalities and discrimination in finding a proper housing unit in the Biscione?
3. Are you satisfied with the forms of public intervention to improve the neighbourhood quality in the last two decades?
4. Did any episode of informal housing take place in the last five years in the Biscione?
5. Did ensuring home ownership seem to be an appropriate response to the social issues of the Biscione?

¹¹ Interview by Francesco Gastaldi on 16 March 2018. The diminution of Biscione residents has followed the wider dynamics of depopulation of the neighbourhood from the 1970s until today (Comune di Genova, 2018, pp. 174 and 228).

¹² Created in 1981 as community service for children, in 2018 it has become a cooperative aiming to manage social, health and educational care services, as well as commercial, agricultural, industrial or service activities aimed at the employment of disadvantaged people.

¹³ The interviewees' personal information is classified (the interviewer had no information on which stakeholder group they belong, their age, gender...) in compliance with privacy (European law on privacy, the so-called General Data Protection Regulation, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679>).

6. Do you think that the Biscione has positively influenced the formation of identity, sense of community and emotional and social well-being?
7. Is Biscione today a “safe” neighbourhood?
8. Are non-residents coming to experience the Biscione in their free-time?
9. Would you define the experience of living in the Biscione a positive during the pandemic?

Tab. 1 - Results of the interviews. Elaboration by F. Camerin (2021)

<i>Answers</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>
Y	32	3	10	0	27	33	38	4	30
N	7	35	21	31	6	4	2	12	6
D-K	1	2	9	9	7	3	0	24	4

This inquiry shows a positive perception of the Biscione’s residents about living in this neighbourhood for economic reasons and the quality of the built environment. According to the statistics provided by the real estate portal “Mercato Immobiliare”¹⁴, the historic and urban centre are more expensive in comparison with the Biscione neighbourhood. By August 2021, the average price for housing sale is 1,896 €/m² and 2,322 €/m² in the historic and urban centre, 1,589 €/m² in Genoa and 1,176 €/m² in the Biscione neighbourhood. Despite being a place of petty crime in the 1980s and 1990s, today the neighbourhood is thought as a safe place, greener with respect to other areas of the city and with an excellent panoramic view. A relevant factor for this new perspective may have been the progressive sale of the residential units that has seemingly contributed to solve the social issues. The intergenerational change - which is still an understudied phenomenon - may have played an important role in the formation of a new identity and sense of community, as well as the abundant green spaces may have positively influenced the emotional and social well-being since the 2020 pandemic outbreak.

Conclusion

Genoa, as well as other Italian cities, was the scene for the implementation of numerous Ina-casa neighbourhoods. However, these social-housing interventions resulted in “peripheral islands” in economic, social and urban

¹⁴ Data found in www.immobiliare.it/mercato-immobiliare/liguria/genova/.

terms mainly due to the negative post-WWII city-making process patterns based on speculation and uncontrolled urbanisation.

The Biscione neighbourhood stands out today as a good result of the social housing policies in Genoa and in the whole country after 1945, even though regarded by many to be a “building monster”. Although the planning and implementation of the Biscione was based more on the logic of speculation and on providing an immediate response to the housing emergency even at the cost of its quality, the perception of the Biscione has positively changed over time. In addition, the buildings of the Forte Quezzi neighbourhood continue to represent a lively and vital part of the city, also thanks to the inclusion of social functions that have improved its community life¹⁵.

The observations of the studies published in recent years and our recent fieldwork and interviews may be the proper base to develop further economic, sociological and urban analyses on the Biscione. An in-depth understanding of the positive change that Biscione is experiencing can be achieved by public institutions-fostered - including academia - surveys. These studies should be aimed to pinpoint the way of life of Genoa’s citizens, including social-housing neighbourhoods’ residents, to identify the possibility of a phenomenon of ‘gentle gentrification’¹⁶, and to frame the opportunities to face the negative trends in terms of socio-economic attractiveness compared to the other two cities belonging to the Italian industrial triangle, i.e. Milan and Turin (Clark, Moonen, Nunley, 2018). The hypotheses to investigate may be the following: Is a phenomenon of social change happening in the Biscione? Is this social change traumatic if we consider the city as a socially just space? How did this process of gradual expulsion of the Biscione’s traditional inhabitants evolve and consolidate over time? Is this social change definitively reconfiguring the neighbourhood into a new identity?

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¹⁵ Testified also by the video that won the “Living landscapes” - *Paesaggi abitati* in Italian - competition held at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennial that documented the current status of the Biscione neighbourhood (<https://vimeo.com/128093228>).

¹⁶ A socioeconomically inclusive urban transformation (Larsen, Hansen, 2008).

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Within the framework of the activities of the H2020 MICADO (Migrant Integration Cockpits and Dashboards) project, this volume brings together a set of contributions on contemporary housing, which represents one of the areas, although not the only one, in which migrants experience a condition of major vulnerability compared to the native population and that hinders their full integration in their new living context and full social participation. Migrants' request for housing is part of the broader context of housing-related problems still unresolved in our country: although they share most of the difficulties encountered by the most vulnerable segments of the native population, at the same time they face a set of additional disadvantages induced by the institutional system, linked to their precarious legal status, and by the market.

This contribution, organized in three thematic sessions (*Local models and processes of ethnic residential segregation; From housing deprivation to housing policies. Distinctive elements in the territory; Housing rights, migrant integration, and the role of ICT solutions*), analyzes housing needs both from a theoretical point of view, to prompt insights into the distinctive features of the new housing issue, but also by reporting the findings of empirical research that can provide elements of evaluation and methodological indications on the topic.

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