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**The European block as a renewed spatial entity among collective living, functional autonomy and sustainability**

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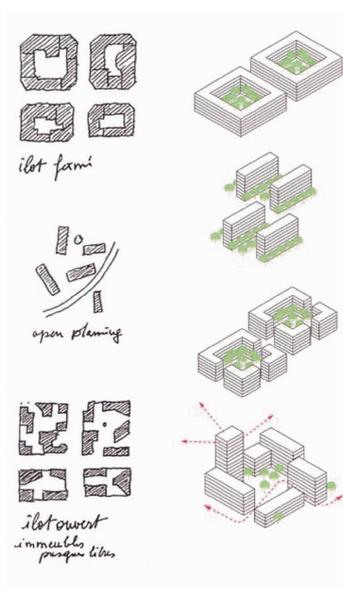
Abstract

The regeneration of the existing urban texture by understanding and defining new solutions is a priority in the current health crisis. In this context, this work aims to explore the potential of a type-morphological model already fully inserted in the line of the European city development: the urban block as structural core that generates the urban fabric.

The proposed actualization lies in the possible maintenance of the traditional characteristics and at the same time in its reinterpretation, guaranteeing a collective residential dimension despite the potential isolation - in terms of health, functionality and energy - from the surrounding urban texture.

Keywords

Urban Block — Urban Density — Energy sustainability



**Fig. 1**

Christian de Portzamparc, «Les trois âges de la ville et l'ilot ouvert», draw (da OÙ va la ville, Jacques Lucan, Paris 2012) © Christian de Portzamparc

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The recent health crisis confronts us with the urgent need for a significant rethinking of urban space. Despite the cities have shown the limits of an unsustainable condition in many ways, the urban one remains nevertheless an unavoidable housing reality. It therefore becomes a priority to focus attention on understanding and defining new solutions to current problems with the ability to reflect, at the same time, on the regenerative potential of the existing tissue.

Even though the collective attention has largely focused on the need to rethink the space of private lodging as an individual confinement area for carrying out the daily activities, the search for solutions able to preserve and foster social relationships remains fundamental, overcoming the fatalistic resignation to a future made of isolation and individualism. Beyond the role of the single dwelling, it becomes important a level of analysis at the urban scale. In this context, is interesting to explore the potential of a type-morphological model already fully inserted in the historical development line of the European urban reality: the urban block, the city's structural core and generator.

Specific element of spatial organization that «the nineteenth century transforms and the twentieth abolishes» (Panerai 1980), the complex evolutionary process of erosion, dissolution, recompositing and opening of the block coincided with the last century's major urban transformations (Reale 2012). Its progressive decomposition, desired by the Modern movement in an attempt to destroy the concept of the *rue corridor* in the name of freedom to place the architectural objects on the urban ground, led to the transformation of *De l'ilot à la barre* (Panerai, Castex and Depaule 1980). However, after the Second World War, its gradual rehabilitation has once



**Fig. 2-3**

ANMA, Îlot Armagnac : 161 dwelling and public space's overview, Bordeaux, 2020 ©2012 ANMA

ANMA, Îlot Armagnac: internal courtyard view, Bordeaux, 2012 ©2020 ANMA

again affirmed its important role in the urban reconstruction.

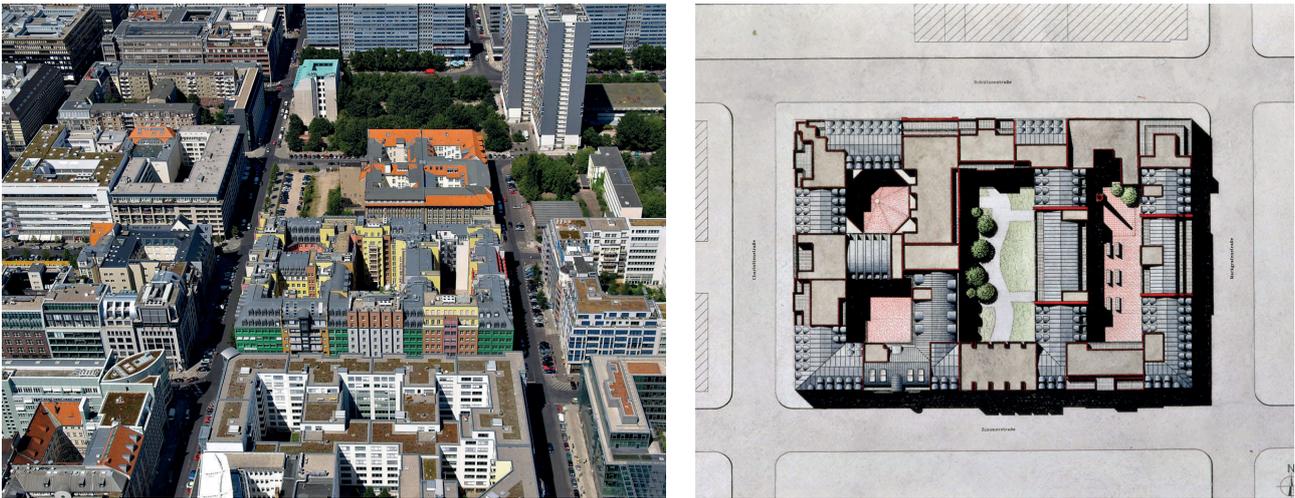
In continuity with an approach definitively established since the late 1970s, aimed at rediscovering the values of place's identity (Rossi 1966) and community (De Carlo 1976), the block still represents a spatial device of great interest and renewed experimentation. In recent decades, numerous architects and urban planners have in fact identified block like the unit from which to take off again in an effort to regenerate the fabric of cities (Portzamparc 1994): a belief that has determined promising architectural experiments such as the *macrolot* French model<sup>1</sup>: a solution of widespread operational success in major French cities considered a valid response to the contemporary planning great challenges (Fromont 2012).

The *macrolot* model is a theoretical-planning evolution of the *îlot* – the block traditionally understood as an autonomous and primordial urban entity – but it proposes a deeper reinterpretation and actualization, opposing the excessive spatial fragmentarism of the *urbanisme parcellaire*<sup>2</sup> that would hinder the pursuit of an *intelligent density* (Michelin 2010). If the contemporary city must be rethought at the scale of the block, the unitary project of a *grand îlot* makes it possible to rethink the traditional plot in a new way: a urban dimension composed of subsets no longer autonomous, but capable to generate new *unités de vie*<sup>3</sup> (Lucan 2012).

In the *macrolot*, residents share – in terms of ownership, right to use and management – the semi-private space of the internal courtyards, various common services and some areas dedicated to collective functions, for a principle of co-ownership that emphasizes the importance of spaces *between* buildings, spaces for free time and sharing.

Despite the emergence of various problems due to the complexity of these operations (difficulty of concertation between a large number of actors, harder distinction between collective and private property in terms of financial and maintenance management, etc.), the «*esprit de copropriété dynamique*» (Lucan 2012) that identify this model's design approach constitutes the major factor of interest for our research. In fact it reveals two main aims: firstly, a renewed search for that social, spatial and relational complexity typical of *neighborhood units* in a porous urban spatiality, an intermediate area between the house and the neighborhood investigated for a long time since the 1960s (Team X 1962); secondly, the desire to integrate different uses, housing types and levels of users in an organic urban entity that constitutes at the same time the minimum generating cell of the entire fabric.

One of the numerous realizations, the *Îlot Armagnac* made in Bordeaux by ANMA, materializes the model described in an articulated functional *stratigraphy*: a sort of small village in a single macro block. As in most cases,

**Fig. 4-5**

A. Rossi, Overview of the block at Schützenstrasse, Berlin, 1996  
© Philipp Meuser

A. Rossi, Plan of the block at Schützenstrasse, Berlino, 1996  
© Fondazione Aldo Rossi

it reveals a redevelopment strategy used for new construction and recovery of large abandoned areas with high functional density programs (Guislain 2016).

However, the approach described can bring together several design and construction choices: the search for a wise spatial modulation (from the private home to the public universe of shared spaces) and the experimentation on housing models that encourage the presence of collective life, should in fact constitute the common denominator of an operational practice that addresses new ways of intervening also on the existing city.

Although the recent health crisis has imposed the word *isolation* as a dictate of a new housing dimension requesting more control and safety, the need for open spaces and places for socialization has emerged as clearly. In this context, it takes on importance rethinking the consolidated city as a system composed of cells (the blocks) and the related possibility of providing autonomy and isolation from a functional, management and energy point of view.

Operationally, we are proposing to intervene at the block scale in an integrated way, with an approach that could be said inspired by Aldo Rossi's working philosophy applied in the *Schützenstraße* block in Berlin. It's about a restoration of a block in which maintenance and integration of part of the pre-existing buildings reflect the progressive stratification of the fabric, of which we are interested in the strong desire to confer a collective urban significance to a heterogeneity of components: an operation conferring new vitality and importance at the interior space as *trait d'union* between buildings, in an attempt to encourage a common sense of belonging and the re-appropriation of spaces beyond the threshold of the individual apartment.

However, rethinking the block in these terms requires today, and in light of the changed social, environmental and sanitary needs, a greater effort in finding solutions for the new housing needs geared towards guaranteeing an ever greater programmatic mixité: the provision of spaces for carrying out sports activities, for coworking and studying, recreational areas and open places for free time, the provision of essential services easily available, are some of the elements that could be condensed and coexisting within an urban module. With similar assumptions, it would nevertheless be possible to guarantee adequate quality in the daily life of the inhabitants even in cases where is required a major social isolation and the natural continuity with the surrounding urban space should be temporarily interrupted.

The newfound unitarity would also allow us to achieve important results

from an energy point of view. In the search for sustainability on multiple levels, the possibility of sharing spaces is in fact potentially linked to the possibility of sharing ways of consuming and producing energy<sup>4</sup> (Ratti 2017; Salat 2011). Considering the block in its entirety, rather than the individual buildings in a fragmented way, would facilitate the continuity of energy exchange through a short and efficient energy path, minimizing situations of unitary disadvantage, promoting the overall energy balance and a greater control of scale in planning and management (Lehmann 2010).

The proposed reinterpretation of the block can take form through several transformative hypotheses, but all necessarily based on some common orientations intended to foreseeing a unity of intervention to make the existing blocks as energetically autonomous and socially rich urban cells, through the “mending” of fabric fragments, the insertion of new collective functions and an adequate rethinking of common spaces. The final aim is the provision of spatial identity and functional complexity to guarantee adequate housing quality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In urban planning, a *macro-lot* is the association of small lots, which can in some cases reach the scale of the urban block (IAU ÎdF 2011).

Like the macrostructures, this new organizational tool of the city takes up, develops and emphasizes the principle of the unity of the parts in the totality of the block.

It concretizes the aspiration to coexistence and the intertwining of different functions - usually distinct - in a single organism with a strong programmatic mixité and urban density, not rejecting however the dialogue with a traditional type fabric with which instead it seeks continuity and relationship (Guislain 2016).

<sup>2</sup> By *urbanisme parcellaire* or *découpage parcellaire* we mean the traditional parceling of blocks into heterogeneous and disconnected lots.

<sup>3</sup> The term “*unité de vie*” is often used starting from the 1950s and 1960s (Team X, 1962) to indicate the “neighborhood units” which, multiplied and mutually articulated, make up a neighborhood or an urban district.

<sup>4</sup> Numerous studies on relation between morphological and energy characteristics conducted by the Urban Morphology Institute in the last ten years have in fact shown how the block represents the right scale of intervention for obtaining high energy performance at local and urban network level.

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