

Re-thinking Poplar District

A new perspective for Robin Hood Gardens

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Citation: O. Fatigato; V. Saitto; V. Di Giulio; G. Finale; M. Galterisi. (2021). Re-thinking Poplar District. A new perspective for Robin Hood Gardens. *UOU scientific journal* #01, 206-221. ISSN: 2697-1518. <https://doi.org/10.14198/UOU.2021.1.15>
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comunità
housing
Robin Hood Gardens
spazi intermedi
Alison & Peter Smithson
communities
housing
Robin Hood Gardens
intermediate spaces
Alison & Peter
Smithson

Date of reception: 11/04/2021
Date of acceptance: 24/06/2021



Ripensare il quartiere di Poplar

Una nuova prospettiva per i Robin Hood Gardens

La pandemia da Covid-19 ha evidenziato numerosi problemi e l'inadeguatezza di alcuni modelli di città occidentali, come New York – o Londra, se ci spostiamo nel continente europeo – il cui sviluppo è profondamente legato alle leggi di mercato. Essi iniziano a vacillare ancor prima del diffondersi della malattia da Coronavirus. Basti pensare alla grande quantità di immobili, destinati ai ricchi investitori stranieri, rimasti invenduti nella metropoli americana. Il distretto londinese di Canary Wharf, modello europeo vicino a quello della east coast americana, rappresenta un paradigma emblematico per comprendere come quel modello, costituito da uffici di grandi corporazioni, da servizi privati e da costose abitazioni, non sia affatto sostenibile a lungo termine e anzi pericoloso se inserito in un contesto urbano, economico e sociale – come quello del quartiere popolare dell'East End – completamente estraneo ad esso.

Il lavoro che introduciamo, ha consentito la sperimentazione di un modello progettuale capace di rispondere alle difficoltà emerse durante la pandemia, attraverso il parziale recupero del complesso dei Robin Hood Gardens di Alison e Peter Smithson, completati nell'East End di Londra nel 1972 e oggi in fase di demolizione.

L'ipotesi parte dall'idea di recuperare il blocco superstite del complesso e di reinterpretare gli elementi fondamentali dello stesso in un nuovo modello residenziale in grado di rispondere in maniera critica alle problematiche che caratterizzano il suddetto modello di città.

La nostra ricerca progettuale ha indagato la natura profonda e il significato che i progettisti intendevano attribuire agli elementi fondamentali e li ha rielaborati, nel tentativo di instillare continuità tra spazi privati e pubblici, punto di partenza per istituire legami tra residenza, strada, edificio e città.

Lavorare su architetture iconiche del Ventesimo secolo significa anche tentare di interpretare e manipolare le idee del movimento moderno in un contesto urbano completamente mutato, e nei riferimenti e nei valori, non per nostalgia ma per ambizione.

There are several issues related to living generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. These topics underlined the inadequacy of some western cities as models for the twenty-first century. City models such as New York – or London, if we look towards Europe – whose development is deeply linked to the laws of the market, began to falter even before Coronavirus spread. We need only think of the amount of housing stock, destined for wealthy foreign investors, left unsold in the American metropolis. The London district of Canary Wharf, the European model closest to the American east coast, represents an emblematic paradigm to understand how this example, consisting of big corporate offices, private services, expensive dwellings accessible to the wealthiest class only, is not sustainable. And in the long term at all, and even dangerous if placed in an urban, economic and social context – such as Tower Hamlets and the East End working-class district – completely unrelated to it.

The project we are introducing has allowed us to experiment with a design approach capable of responding to the difficulties that emerged during the pandemic, through a partial recovery of the Alison and Peter Smithson's Robin Hood Gardens complex, completed in 1972 in London' East End and currently under demolition.

The hypothesis that we propose starts from the idea of recovering the surviving block of the complex and reinterpreting its fundamental elements in new residential model that can respond critically to the problems that characterize the aforementioned city model¹. Our design research has investigated the meaning that the designers attributed to these elements and has reworked them to instil continuity between private and public spaces, the starting point to establish a link between dwelling and street, street and building, building and city.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research on multi-family residences today is a highly topical issue. The constant technological and social changes that characterize modernity have a radical impact on people's lifestyles and require a continuous rethinking of ways of living. Thus, designers are asked to prepare updated residential models. These models give us the opportunity to instil a sense of security and favouring, in Le Corbusier's words, an 'organic development of existence'³ for the inhabitants. The Modern Movement attempted to rescue the contemporary individual from the alienation of the moment. Therefore, it produced works designed on the concepts of "freedom" and "identity" for a long time. "Freedom" meant primarily liberation from the absolutist systems of the Baroque age and their successors, that is, a new right to choose and participate. "Identity" meant to bring man back to what is original and essential⁴.

Contemporary collective residential buildings inherit the premises of the Modern Movement, overcoming the standardization of the complexes built in the Sixties and Seventies, to give space to a design responsive to the relationship between the collective and individual dimensions, and capable of responding to an increasingly differentiated and multicultural catchment area. The housing unit, meant as a basic unit for the construction of buildings, is today a flexible space,



Fig. 1 – View from Robin Hood Gardens of the new residential estates built in Tower Hamlets (Getty images).

never static, able to meet the needs of the inhabitants and respond to temporal changes; a reflection on the meanings of "public", of "sociality" and on the complicated relationship between the collective and the private sphere⁵.

Recent studies, in particular devoted to northern Europe, have shown a renewed way of making these places, often highlighting ecological values as the basis of the recovery of iconic buildings of the twentieth century. It is in the wake of these researches that it was decided to experiment with the theme of collective housing unit, by imagining a different future for a controversial twentieth-century building: Alison and Peter Smithson's Robin Hood Gardens (Fig.1), built in London's East End in 1972. Recently one of the two buildings of the housing complex has been demolished, and the last still standing is also going to be demolished, to make way for the new Blackwall Reach's district. It is not easy

to establish what would have been the right way to save it. It is difficult to imagine if the residential intervention that will replace it will satisfy the needs of a neighbourhood, that continues to preserve its popularity.

The experimentation described in this contribution, therefore, examines two particularly topical themes: on the one hand, it investigates the fate of respected residential architecture of the twentieth century, on the other, it experiments with collective living, in all its forms, through new buildings and new public spaces.

The idea of "protecting" and "taking care" of the surviving block of an icon of English Brutalism is not a romantic and nostalgic attitude, it is rather an ambition: an attempt to project the idea of community into the future that the Smithsons, perhaps too early, had imagined.

LIVING, TOGETHER

‘Have you ever thought that we shape, day by day and all together, this space?’. ‘How we will live together?’. Two fundamental questions related to collective housing, expressed almost seventy years apart by Gian Carlo De Carlo at the Urban Planning Exhibition of the 10th Milan Triennale in 1954, and by Hashim Sarkis, current curator of the 17th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice. Two questions that still highlight today ‘in the context of widening political divides and growing economic inequalities, we [need to] imagine spaces in which we can generously live together’⁶.

Architects, urban planners and designers are called to face the environmental crisis and social inequality. This double crisis along with the global pandemic have highlighted the inadequacy of urban space⁷ and, on the other hand, raised fundamental issues about the importance of residential buildings. ‘Defending the pleasure of living seems eminently political to us today. It is a need that must be treated on the same level as an environmental priority’⁸. Dwellings can no longer be considered as profitable financial products: they must be spatially generous, economic, the heart of a more comprehensive program capable of promoting a possible social and collective living⁹. The house must be considered as a “gift” for the community; it plays an active role in fostering the sense of “hospitality” and inclusiveness that the whole

city needs.

In a speech given in 2018 at the Parents Circle Families Forum in Tel Aviv, David Grossmann said that ‘the home is the place whose walls - whose boundaries - are clear and agreed upon. Whose existence is stable, unassailable and serene. [...] A place that projects a sense of the future’¹⁰. The intimate codes that govern the internal order of the house and its relations with the collective spaces of the building must return to be an explicit reference to civil coexistence, continuously updated and made operational¹¹. The starting point becomes the organization of public and private human activities, to generate spaces capable of responding to changing needs. The activities and uses of the inhabitants, only partially predictable, lead to a reflection on the definition of spaces with specific functions, relatively fixed in time, and places with flexible functions, continuously transformable. Dwellings and collective spaces described in the following paragraphs, offer freedom of use, generate the possibility of evolution, ‘providing as much extra space as programmed space, free for use, to promote relationships’¹². Our proposal is an ‘escape route’, withdrawing from reality with the aim of ‘fabricating [a] possibility, [a] project within the project’¹³. The system of domestic and collective spaces, into which the project is divided, is conceived as the fundamental ‘elements’ of a project that has the ambitious goal of being welcoming,

inclusive, capable of promoting relationships through the design of programmed spaces of an evolutionary nature, variously appropriable and transformable over time.

EAST END OF LONDON AND THE SMITHSONS’ LESSON

Are there spaces in which the sense of community is more concretized? Following the Second War, there was a focus on “in-between spaces”, taking an interest in those places that help integrate the concept of traditional living. The definition of “in-between spaces” is not univocal, but can be framed in a certain constellation of spaces that form communities starting from a hierarchy of associative elements, which express various level of association: house, street, district, city.

In 1947, Aldo van Eyck introduced into the architectural debate the importance of the areas we call today “proximity spaces”, by designing a dense network of playgrounds for Amsterdam. This theme was subsequently taken up in the urban and domestic theories proposed by the members of Team 10 at the 9th International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in Aix en Provence in 1953. The idea behind the construction of these spaces, is linked to the ability that human beings have to recognize themselves in the environment in which he or she lives, and in the community that it inhabits. Through the actions that constitute living in between – of which threshold spaces, balconies, galleries, gardens, courtyards, buffer zones are

spatial expression – Team 10 configured new spaces for relationships, capable of transcending divisions, fears and inconsistencies caused by the post-war reconstruction¹⁴.

In this regard, London's East End represents an exemplary case study. For a long time, a changing and multi-ethnic territory, it housed the Robin Hood Gardens lot, in a border position between two factions of the neighbourhood that, in the sixties, represented an interesting study area from an urban and social point of view. Starting from Judith Stephen and Nigel Henderson's photographs and studies of the area, the Smithsons, studying the game activities of children, drew up the Urban Re-Identification Grid, a visual map based provocatively on the ASCORAL group grid, proposed during CIAM 7 of Bergamo in 1949. The polemical attitude of the couple, shared by the other Team 10 members, this set the stage for some reflections on the very nature of the Modern Movement's method, whose positivist reduction was considered constrictive and excluded various aspects of social relations and neighbourhood collective life, based on stereotypical categorized actions. The project of Robin Hood Gardens emerged after a long series of experiments on collective living that the Smithsons first expressed in the Golden Lane project. This unrealized project clearly conveyed the nature of their theories about a continuous search for a space not limited to basic functions –

dwelling, working, recreation, transportation – as of the Modern Movement, but could be hybrid, interpenetrated, and that could generate spontaneous interactions and unpredictable uses.

This area is greatly changed. The gradual gentrification, which has plagued the area after the conversion of the old docks from 1989 onwards, seems today unavoidable and high-density housing complexes have gradually arisen around Robin Hood Gardens, with costs per square meter far above the means of local residents, who become forced to leave the area. The new City of London is spreading like wildfire towards Poplar, and the fate of the neighbourhood seems increasingly to lean towards an exclusive use of the middle and upper class. If we look at recent events in the area and the events following the Covid-19 pandemic, it is instructive to make a comparison with the urban theories of Team 10.

The depopulated arteries and the glass cathedrals of the big corporations, emptied of their content by the forced remote working condition, bring to our mind the criticism made by van Eyck on the sectorialization of the city, which certainly cannot be ascribed to the urban theories of the Modern Movement, but shares its negative effects. The urban fabric of Canary Wharf, its unfair relationship with the adjacent Poplar – from the point of view of income, scale of the buildings, data on deprivation, etc. – contributes to the fragmentation of the

district, ongoing for several decades, and of the presence of infrastructure makes change impracticable. The presence of fast-flowing roads around the site makes the neighbourhood difficult to cross for pedestrians and cyclists; the Aspen Way to the south and the Blackwall Tunnel, which connects the neighbourhood on the north-south axis, make the district a disjointed sequence difficult to read. The Smithsons had already dealt with such infrastructures in the Sixties when designing the two buildings so they defined a large internal area, named a "stress free zone". The two buildings develop longitudinally to protect this area, and the circulation spaces are located on the external fronts. The connotation that they intended to attribute to the central open space was mainly aimed at play and leisure. The artificial hills were intended to stimulate the sense of discovery and spontaneous use, and at the same time to mitigate the sense of estrangement that would have been perceived from the upper floors of the two buildings. The configuration of the space, therefore, on the one hand defines a protected internal environment, on the other is one of the main reasons for the isolation of the complex from the surrounding space. The arrangement of the two blocks, together with the perimeter walls designed to muffle the noises of vehicular traffic, constitute the elements causing the segregation of the area from the neighbourhood.

The west building of the complex, placed along Cotton

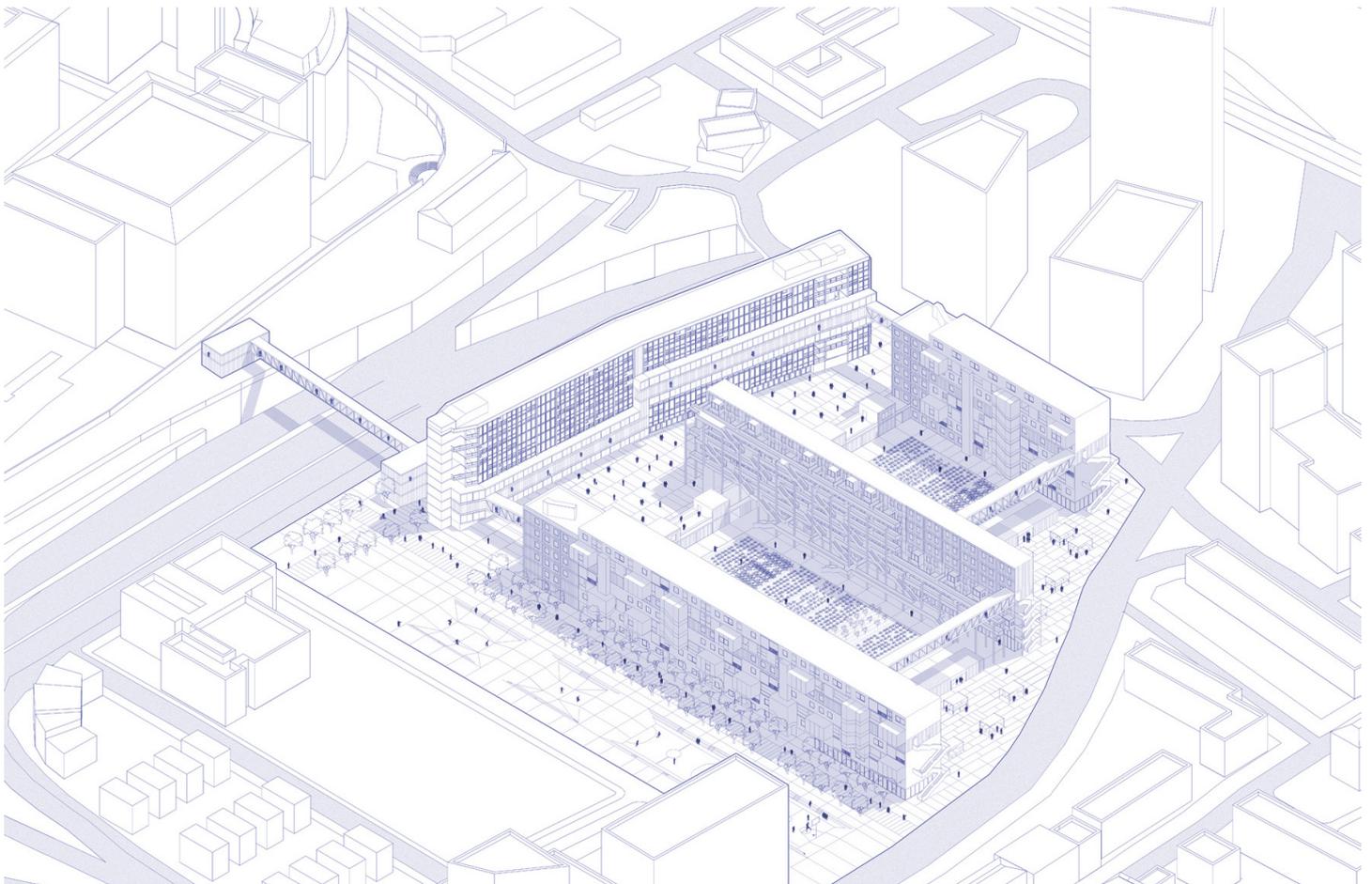


Fig. 2 – The new hybrid district.

Street, was demolished in 2017, compromising the urban layout of the district irremediably. Despite the mobilization of many illustrious insiders – Richard Rogers and Zaha Hadid among many – the only successful attempt to preserve the complex, is the one promoted by the Victoria & Albert Museum, which bought and musealized a section of three floors, including accommodation, complete with street in the sky, testifying not only the importance of the complex, but also to the relationship between residence and street¹⁵.

From these premisses, comes the need to understand how this absence can be an incentive to redesign a renewed urban layout, which can encourage a dialogue with the

pre-existing city, establishing relations with it that take into account the evolution of the neighbourhood, established over the last forty years without any involvement of the brutalist complex. Observing the development of the city around Robin Hood Gardens, it is interesting to understand how the decisions of the designers have had an effect on the life of this part of the city. The large noise barriers placed on the east and west fronts of the complex produce two blind fronts, along Cotton Street and towards the Blackwall Tunnel. This strong separation from neighbourhood, which only allows residents to cross the stress-free zone, dictated that public pedestrian paths move only along these roads. Around this area, statistics show a significantly higher incidence of

crime than the neighbourhood average, which is in turn much higher than the rest of the city¹⁶. There is no certain direct correlation between the shape of the Robin Hood Gardens and this data, but they offer us food for thought about its relationship with the city¹⁷.

Starting from these premisses, it was necessary to carry out design research that looks at the whole system as a way to stimulate the relationship between the individual and the community, generating a sequence of in-between spaces through the relationships in which it is involved, placing itself as an element capable of accentuating, underlining and defining them (Fig.2). We therefore tried to think, above all, about the relationship between the parts rather

than the shape of the new residential complex, thinking about human associations and how the project can encourage them, thus trying to imagine a system flexible enough to be at the same time a space for circulation, to stay, to play and to live, and able to be adapted to future unpredictable uses.

RE-THINKING SMITHSONS' FUNDAMENTALS

'In order to keep ease of movement, we propose a multi-level city with residential 'streets-in-the-air'. These are linked together in a multilevel continuous complex, connector where necessary to work places and to those ground elements that are necessary at each level of association. Our hierarchy of associations is woven into a modulated continuum, representing the true complexity of human associations'¹⁸.

In a speech given during CIAM 9, Alison and Peter Smithson highlighted the value of "building community" through the design of a hierarchy of associative elements: the house, the street, the district, the city. This concept derives from Van Eyck's intuition to dwell on an interstitial view. Focusing on the space among the buildings, in those places in the balance between inside and outside theorized by van Eyck, is fundamental to encourage interaction and cohesion among people and to develop a sense of belonging to places capable of promoting a new organization of space. According to the Smithsons, in the associative complexity of

a community, social cohesion can only be achieved through a multilevel city, organized by cluster, based on a network of spaces, situations and new communication structures. A new layer covers the city, respects the existing buildings and gives more freedom to the inhabitants.

In the Robin Hood Gardens project, the new layer is represented by a street in the sky: rue – in Le Corbusier's view – placed on the facade, imagined as a space for casual interaction. They are horizontal surfaces to take a walk, overcoming the traditional idea of balconies and reproduce, at high level, the relational quality of the classic English alley. By the designers' admission, the streets of Robin Hood Gardens did not get the residents consent as they hoped. Although streets are animated by the thresholds of the different dwellings, they are used exclusively as places of transit, to walk in the shortest possible time and never seen as a space for socializing between neighbours. 'The darkening of the windows facing the corridors for privacy reasons, sometimes associated with a lack of internal or district services, invalidates the comparison with the city arteries, crowded with people and pervaded by a vital atmosphere'¹⁹. Peter Smithson will admit that this is, in fact, the greatest failure of Robin Hood Gardens: the threshold of the housing unit, imagined as a customizable environment, as he says, becomes an indeterminate area.

The "streets" of the Robin

Hood Gardens extend the concept of the "in-between space" to all public or private areas and to the threshold with the alcove in front of the access to houses. It is a space that interacts among different and contrasting spatial areas and that 'designates at the same time proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority. [...] It confuses them, letting the outside in and the inside out, separating and uniting them'²⁰. This dualism between inside and outside is no longer dichotomous but outlines a way of living between things. This way belongs to both and becomes a joining space. The streets in the sky are, therefore, the place for relationships and, at the same time, they are an amplification of the intimacy of the domestic space. To reinterpret the fundamental elements of one of the manifestos of English Brutalism allowed us to reflect on an "indeterminate architecture", capable of suggesting flexible methods of use, starting from a careful analysis of potential users. Therefore, the spaces of the relationship among the buildings are fundamental. They embrace the community proposed by the Smithsons in their theories, evolving in a new network of relationships that connect the pre-existing and the new hybrid district to the urban layout from which the building was originally isolated. The new streets in the sky network is present in every building of the new complex and connects all the collective spaces that serve the district and those reserved for residents (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – New Urban link: a reinterpretation of cluster.

The layout of the new district is based on an articulated system of open spaces planned as multi-scale devices. Spaces between things are hinge spaces and are used for the development of new relationships among pre-existing buildings and new projected volumes. The proposal stems from critical reflection on the original open space of Robin Hood Gardens and not creating new spaces of a univocal and completed way. It is configured as a critical reinterpretation of the fundamentals²¹ of the Smithsons' project.

Robin Hood Gardens Square

The space between the Robin Hood Building and the three new buildings – the Woolmore Building, the Cotton Building and the Poplar High Building –

placed across it, is interpreted as the main circulation space of the neighbourhood. This function is underlined by the relation between the three new buildings and the pre-existing, whose ground floors function as laboratories and home-studios, defining a space dedicated to artists and creatives able to dialogue with the three transverse buildings.

The new intervention is a sequence of open and closed spaces, a place that is both internal and external, porous, stretched, crossing the base of the Robin Hood Building until it reaches the front of the Blackwall Tunnel. At this point the car parking space, becomes elevated and sees the addition of a shop front on Robin Hood Lane, and a cycle and a pedestrian path (Fig.4).

The playgrounds

The relationship between the north building, named Woolmore Building, and the school complex of the Woolmore Primary School, invites us to reflect on the playful dimension of the urban space and its spontaneous uses. Starting from the Smithson's reflections on the public space and the study conducted by van Eyck on the architecture of Dutch playgrounds, it was decided to design a free space, open to the interpretation of the users, characterized by ground movements that generate small depressions, in which different and unexpected activities are supposed to be carried out (Fig. 4). These spaces lend themselves to partial flooding during rainy periods, acting as a rainwater collection system,

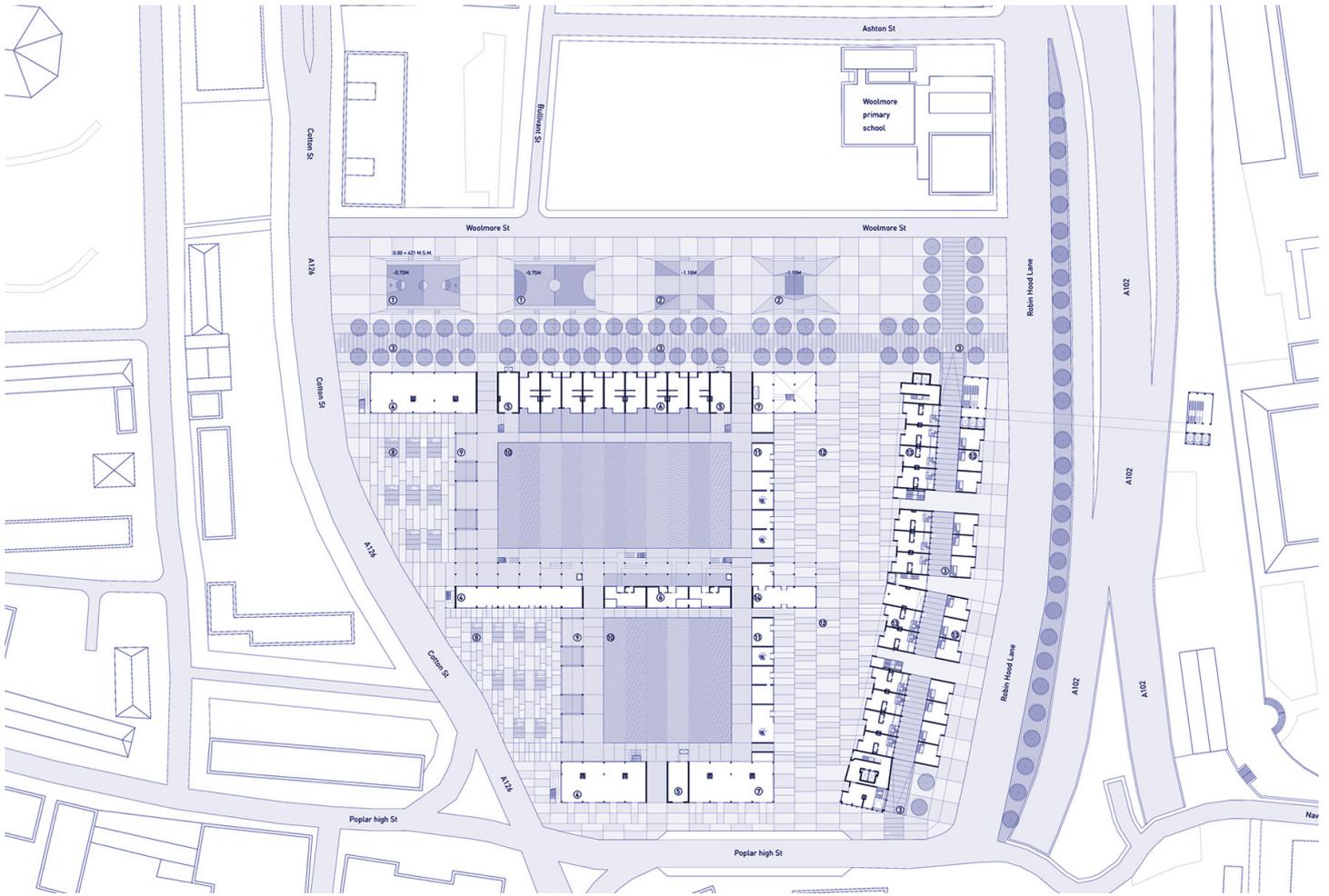


Fig. 4 – Ground floor plan of the district.



Fig. 5 – Inner courtyard section.

and at as an ideal reminder of the scenario of the merchant docks, that represent a part of the collective memory of the neighbourhood until the Eighties.

THE PRODUCTIVE COURTYARDS

The space between the three buildings transversal to the Robin Hood Building, is configured as a sequence of two communicating courtyards. This space takes up the intimate nature of the stress-free zone, altering its morphological connotations, resizing and dividing it into two smaller spaces. The original configuration of the complex provided housing for the elderly in the ground floors of the two buildings, with direct access to the green area. A part of this, difficult to manage in its extension, has been turned in our project into urban gardens, a function suggested by the users of the Robin Hood Gardens, who in recent years have created small gardens between the public space and the homes of the elderly to ensure the privacy of ground floors. In the new configuration, this accommodation is moved to the private courtyards area, providing a large filter between the two parts, consisting of a patio - sometimes private, sometimes common to several dwellings - which is proposed as an access and as an autonomous user appropriation area. This solution recalls the classic terraced blocks of the English city, a mediation space between inside and outside, a buffer zone, a further contact space between the public and private spheres (Fig. 5). The

sequence of urban gardens, placed in the private courtyards, mitigates the relationship between inside and outside by offering a place for co-operation and meeting.

From the street in the sky to new inhabited threshold

The retrofit of the Robin Hood Building begins from a spatial and functional reinterpretation of the street in the sky. Starting with the temporality studies proposed by Lacaton and Vassal and by LAN studio²², the possibility of changing partitions and interior finishes, was imagined responding to varying conditions of use over time. A plan was emptied from the original functions and destined for public functions. The streets in the sky, which previously became spaces to walk quickly, are enriched with domestic elements and bow windows that interact with the same street, taking on a new meaning and defining a place poised between inside and outside where people can identify and recognize themselves.

In the new buildings, the deck is also a reinterpretation of the street in the sky. It is a space characterized by customizable access thresholds to the housing unit and allows a strong relationship with the domestic space, thanks to the large glass surfaces of the bow windows.

The Smithsons' hypotheses are reinterpreted to generate a tension between the spaces of relationship, replacing the void of the streets in the sky with functional boxes that are designed as extrusions on the facade (Fig. 6). In between

habitats capable of combining the desire for intimacy with the pleasure of socializing, which, by restoring the value of a real urban artery to this street in the sky, represents at the same time a public extension of the domestic space. The domesticity of these places is emphasized by the finishes, which can be associated with a private space. The areas imagined are characterized by different functions: reading rooms and play areas that differ according to the needs of users. The new deck can also be customized, not only thanks to the furnishings of the residents, but also through the large windows that become a representation of infinite rituals and ways of living.

In other cases, the deck is further reinterpreted because it is detached from the facade of the building (Fig. 7). The access threshold to the house is extended: it is a suggestive aerial path that isolates the domestic space from the busy activity of the path. In the space that is generated between the gallery and the building, suspended rooms are inserted, a further interpretation of the bow window. These spaces, together with the loggias on the opposite side, allow a certain margin of appropriation by the residents. Faced with a system of fixed furnishings, these places suggest ways of use and allow the inhabitant to occupy the spaces with their objects according to their needs.

EVOLUTIVE HOUSING

Investigating the most intimate details of living is indispensable. The domestic



Fig. 6 – Woolmore building. Interior view of a deck.

interior, a place where needs and desires are condensed and amplified, is here interpreted as a constantly evolving space, as are human needs, after all. That is the reason why it's important to imagine dynamic, «democratic»²³ and flexible spaces. But before exploring spaces issues, it is necessary to briefly note the methodology and the kind of representation used in this work.

Starting again from the experiences of some French studies²⁴, and of northern Europe in general, it has been chosen to describe these places with a “humanized” representation, in order to give the sense of domesticity sought in all fields of this workshop. We devised an atlas of unconventional households,

reflecting a community of residents, referring to the study of the interviews conducted by Gennaro Postiglione, professor at the Politecnico di Milano, to the most recent research published by Viviana Saitto and Cristina Colombo²⁵, and to the workshop of photographer Kois Miah and sociologist Nick Thoburn – Lived Brutalism: portraits from Robin Hood Gardens housing estate. This atlas allowed us to “customize” the drawings, to tell the life of these places over time, thanks to the introduction of a “time variable”. This kind of representation enabled us to imagine an endless and unpredictable network of situations, to make visible the numerical and human variety of the catchment area. The

new residential complex is, in this way, told through the lives of its inhabitants as imagined by the Smithsons – and by the other members of Team 10 in general – that have always considered the reality related to human needs in their drawings, collages and axonometrics.

The Robin Hood Gardens and the new housing units

‘At number 146a Muslim woman lives with her one-year-old baby. A lively, smiling, but wary Ghanaian woman lives at number 134. At number 206 lives a Central African couple. At number 164 there is a woman with a few years old child, which we only know by reflection; the smell of food suggests they are Indian. At 202 lives a tall, mighty man,



Fig. 7 – Cotton building. Interior view of a deck.

that we only saw from the back. At 172 lives Carolina, she is Polish and she has a Great Dane; she hates this place. Then there is the maintenance man; he was sure he had known us and had seen us there before. He allowed us to visit an apartment. [...] The rooms are very small and have few free available walls. As a matter of facts, desks and wardrobes are often improperly approached to the windows. The kitchen is the only equipment supplied, so it is the only room still furnished²⁶.

There are different types of accommodation, single and duplex, designed by the Smithsons in the Robin Hood Gardens, but all of them follow the same criteria: the “noisy” living rooms are facing the

road, while bedrooms and kitchens look into the inner courtyard, maybe to give the possibility of checking on kids playing in the stress free zone. The study of the characteristics of the Smithsons project – whose intentions were to connote the domestic interior using different thresholds – led to a critical interpretation of the accommodation and to its declination in different types.

The new housing unit projected for the Robin Hood Building respects the reinforced concrete structure. A new layer of extremely light and dry-installed equipment overlaps the hardware of load-bearing walls and existing cables. The neutral, homogeneous and unifying container is a device that allows people to customize

the space according to their needs (Fig. 8).

The threshold space is reinterpreted: the bow window marks the gradual transition to a more intimate dimension of the dwelling. A sliding panel inside this first internal area, gives the possibility to make the bow window completely introverted, linked to the intimacy of the dwelling; but, if necessary, the full opening of the panel makes this room almost an extension of the “road”. This space, poised between semi-public and private, is then transformed into a hinged space: the threshold acquires its “tridimensionality” and becomes habitable. This customizable place is the representation of the personal way of living of each inhabitant.

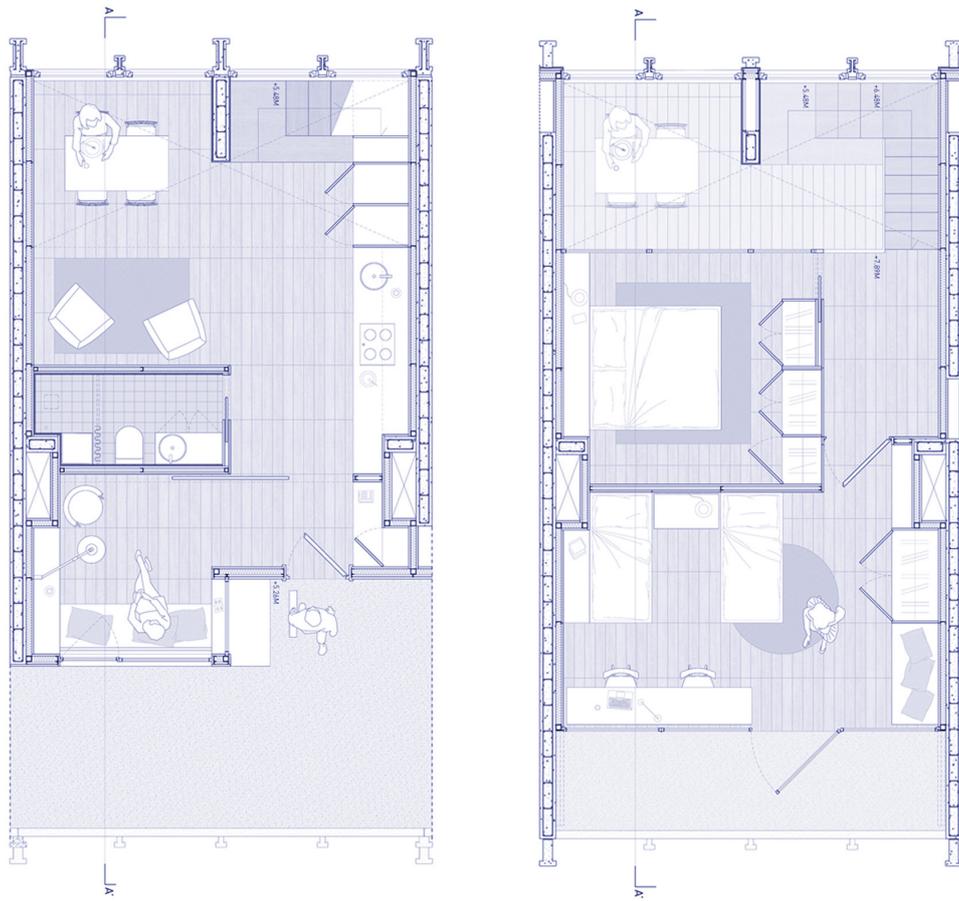
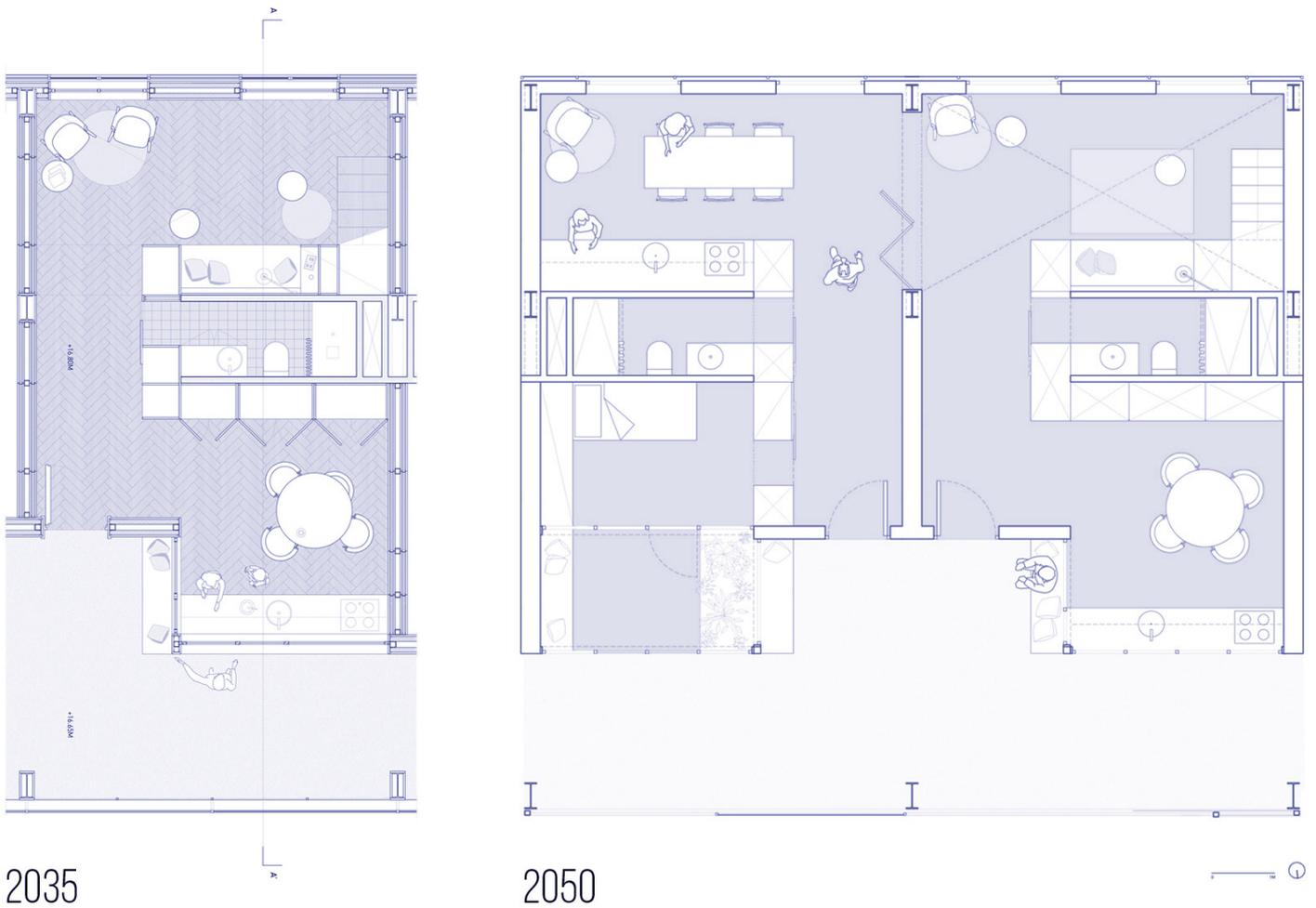


Fig. 8 – Robin Hood building. Lower and upper-level plans of new dwelling.



2035

2050

Fig. 9 – Woolmore building. Lower-level plans. From left to right: configuration of dwelling in 2035 and 2050.



Fig. 10 – Cotton building. Plan of a cohousing typology.

This is the difference with the original Smithsons' project: customizing the deck does not just mean placing the furniture outside, but also tells the habits, the history of the inhabitants.

The internal staircase, originally located at the entrance of the house, turns into a piece of furniture rather than a pure connecting element, is able to shield the facade and to establish a relationship with the outside. The facade changes: it is a surface characterized by a new system of loggias that allows a private relationship with the outer space.

The evolving housing unit of the Woolmore Building is similarly designed. The threshold space is here customizable too, not only

through the alcove that hosts the entrance to the lodgings, but also thanks to the bow window system, which in this case accommodates different functions – kitchens, winter gardens, smart working areas. Varying accommodations are made by a system of light and easily changeable partitions. So, it is possible to imagine a potential expansion of the space too, which could respond to the variation of households over time (Fig. 9).

In the Cotton Building different types of houses coexist, they not only reflect on the number of inhabitants, but also on their habits. Studios for singles and dwelling for unconventional families are characterised by sufficiently flexible spaces to allow infinite internal variations (Fig. 10).

CONCLUSIONS

This proposal tries to meet the housing needs of the Poplar district, putting the housing issues before any potential financial benefit for the residential estate that will replace Robin Hood Gardens. It relates to a plurality of need, in constant evolution, of today's society and to the need to create community. Architectural practice, often victim of building speculation, has not always been able to imagine spaces – collective and/or private – able to respond to the needs of individuals over time.

The project idea described above, is part of a current of thought that, for several years now, defends the existing building stock. 'Never demolish, always add' is an increasingly widespread modus operandi

that interprets the assumptions of the Modern Movement: '[...] not for nostalgia but for ambition'. The architecture promoted by the members of Team 10 during the years following the CIAM 9, laid the foundations for the creation of flexible, generous spaces, free from constraints. Contemporary practice has the duty to take up these concepts and to imagine new ways of producing, predicting and transforming the spaces of everyday living, because the pleasure of living must be treated as a design priority – as well as current environmental and social issues – and, of course, looking at the problems highlighted by the pandemic crisis.

'Defending the pleasure of living seems eminently political to us today. It is a need [...] Space is a common good, just like the sun, air or light. It is a vital material'.

Author contributions: the authors jointly conceived and developed the approach and decided on the overall objective and structure of the paper. In particular, conceptualisation and methodology, O.F., V.S.; methodology, investigation and validation, writing original draft, writing review and editing, O.F., V.S.; methodology, investigation, project elaboration, writing original draft, writing, editing V.D.G., G.F., M.G. In particular: Introduction and Living, together O.F. and V. S.; East End of London and the Smithsons' lesson G.F.; Re-thinking Smithsons' fundamentals M.G.; Evolutive Living V.D.G.

NOTES

¹The research starts from the investigation held in the Master Degree Thesis Robin Hood Gardens Re.Lo.A.D by V. Di Giulio, G. Finale, M. Galterisi at DiARC, UNINA, supervised by O. Fatigato e V. Saitto e co-supervised by M. Cerreta.

²La ricerca parte dallo studio effettuato durante la Tesi Magistrale dal titolo: Robin Hood Gardens Re.Lo.A.D di V. Di Giulio, G. Finale, M. Galterisi presso il DiARC, UNINA, con la relazione di O. Fatigato e V. Saitto e correlazione di M. Cerreta.

³LE CORBUSIER. *Vers une architecture*. Paris : Éditions Crès, 1923, p. 6.

⁴NORBERG-SCHULTZ, Christian. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980, p. 192.

⁵Cfr. FATIGATO, Orfina. I grands ensembles una "singolare plurale" eredità. In: BDC. 2015, vol.15, issue 2.

⁶Introduction to the exhibition How we will live together?, XVII International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, Venice, May 22 to November 21, 2021. <https://www.labiennale.org/it/architettura/2021>

⁷Cfr. CHIPPERFIELD, David. We need a vision for housing. In: *Domus*. February 2020, issue 1043, p. 5.

⁸LACATON, Anne, VASSAL, Jean Philippe, *Pleasure of living*. In: *Domus*. November 2020, issue 1051, pp. 29-33.

⁹ibidem

¹⁰To read the dialogue see GROSSMANN, David. Israele sia una casa, non una fortezza. Ricordando Uri. In *Corriere della Sera*. April 18, 2018, p. 15.

¹¹Cfr. CONSONNI, Giancarlo. *Carta dell'habitat*. Milan: La Vita Felice, 2019, p. 43.

¹²LACATON, Anne, VASSAL, Jean Philippe, op.cit., pp. 32.

¹³Ivi, pp. 30.

¹⁴Housing theories by Alison and Peter Smithson are documented in: SMITHSON, Alison. *Team 10 Primer*. London: Studio Vista Limited, 1968.

¹⁵The assumptions underlying the original project are documented in: SMITHSON, Alison. *Team 10 Primer*. London: Studio Vista Limited, 1968.

¹⁶Cfr. London police data store: https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/recorded_crime_summary.

¹⁷The report conducted by the municipality of Tower Hamlets in 2011 provides information for understanding the needs of citizens, who very often focus on the possibility of making the study more permeable to pedestrian and cycling flows.

¹⁸Alison and Peter Smithson, CIAM 9, Aix-en-Provence, July 24th, 1953.

¹⁹COLOMBO, Cristina F., SAITTO Viviana. *Utopia srl. Icone sconfitte dell'housing sociale*. Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, 2018, pp. 38-40, p. 40.

²⁰GENETTE, Gerard. *Soglie*. Turin: Einaudi Paperbacks, 1966.

²¹Cfr. KOOLHAAS R., OMA, *Fundamentals Catalogue*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2014.

²²Cfr. 530 housing transformation project for the Grand Parc du Bordeaux by Lacaton & Vassal, Frédéric Druot and Christophe Hutin.

²³ERSKINE, Ralph. *Democratic architecture. The universal and useful art: projects and reflections*. In Thomas Cubitt Lecture. March 31, 1982, pp. 642-659.

²⁴Cfr. the methodological approach to the design of the Pritzker Prima Lacaton & Vassal.

²⁵COLOMBO, Cristina F., SAITTO, Viviana, op.cit., pp. 35-41, 54-75.

²⁶COLOMBO, Cristina F., SAITTO Viviana, op.cit., p. 65.

²⁷ZABALBEASCOA, Anaxu. Architectural priorities are challenged in the revolutionary renovations carried out by the studio Lacaton & Vassal. In: *Domus*. April 2019, issue 1034, pp. 428-429.

²⁸LACATON, Anne, VASSAL, Jean Philippe, 14th International Docomomo Conference. *Docomomo international*, september 6-9, 2016.

²⁹LACATON, Anne, VASSAL, Jean Philippe, *Pleasure of living*, op.cit., p. 29.

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