

“Building conviviality in the block and beyond: zones of encounter and the role of young families in a mixed planned community in Milan”

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Introduction¹

The degree of social interaction and the possibility to establish relations among different groups is one of the main concern in the analysis of social mix policies effects and yet evidence is sparse. Some authors have argued that these processes are enhanced if the mix is at the block/building level. However, evidence at this scale is still limited and particularly in countries with low levels of spatial segregation and a Mediterranean welfare regime, where empirical studies about social mix policies are few (Bricocoli & Cucca 2014). In this direction, the paper proposes reflections drawing from an on-going piece of research on the social housing project ViaPadova36 in the city of Milan.

This is a project proving affordable housing to families of Italian and immigrant origins, university students, elderly people, as well as vulnerable individuals and families, to experiment a communal form of living in a building located in Via Padova a multi-ethnic and stigmatised neighbourhood in the city. The ultimate goal of the project is that of fostering social cohesion through the promotion of encounters and the construction of relations among dwellers in the building block and in the wider neighbourhood. It was specifically planned for this very diverse area, with the goal to overturn its negative stigmatization by putting to value its human and infrastructural resources.

Our contribution focuses on community development activities aimed at promoting encounters and interactions between new and old occupiers, as well as with residents in the wider area. Through a qualitative and ethnographic study of the project in its making we will explore the roles and the approaches adopted by the community development worker (CD worker) and the so called “famiglie consapevoli” (literally socially-conscious families - SC Families)

¹ A new version of this paper has been accepted for publication in the journal “Sociologia Urbana e Rurale” issue n. 108/2015.

The former has been entrusted by Abitare Sociale Metropolitan (ASM), that it to say the consortium of co-operatives that manages the project, with responsibility over property and facility management and with a community development task; the SC families, a selected group of families and new occupiers, have been involved in community development activities. The scope of the paper is to try and discuss to what extent these two actors might be contributing to the ultimate goal of the project hence the promotion of social cohesion.

The paper is organised as follows: first, we will provide a short overview of the relevant literature. Second, we will provide a brief description of the project in the context of the Milanese housing policy, and of the socio-economic context of Via Padova. Third, the empirical discussion will follow and lead to some preliminary conclusions.

The empirical evidence builds on an on-going research, including the following material collected between May 2014 and March 2015: information from the relevant websites², a dedicated chapter on the project by Pologruto (2013); press releases and promotional leaflets; interviews with key informants and in particular a project officer of Fondazione Housing Sociale who was in charge for defining agreements with old occupiers before refurbishment works started; a community worker who has been responsible for the selection of the new occupiers and is now responsible for community development work; the President of Abitare Social Metropolitan; volunteers of the association “Via Padova è meglio di Milano”, repeated on-going informal conversations with the community worker, since June 2014; participation to the meetings of and discussions with the “famiglie consapevoli”; participant observation at relevant events, such as the opening of the project, on November 21st 2014; an on-line ethnography of the “Via Padova - da Loreto a Giacosa – e dintorni” social street.

² Available at: <http://www.viapadova36.it/> (last accessed on August 7th 2014); www.maisondumonde36.it (last accessed on March 27th 2014 – no more online).

1. The debate on social mix: setting the research on ViaPadova36 into context

A vast literature is available on social mix. It would be rather challenging to provide any critical review and it is not the scope of this paper. Next we will recall the main lines of the debate to frame our contribution.

Urban planners have called for socio-economic diversity in social housing and urban regeneration initiatives, while urban policy-makers have favoured social mix based on two main arguments, as explained by Bolt and Van Kempen (2013). According to the first argument, proximity among different social groups can stimulate encounters and interactions which can in turn foster social cohesion through the development of place attachment feelings and the emergence of common norms (Kearns and Forrest, 2000; Dekker and Bolt, 2005). Cohesion can also impact on social control thus preventing anti-social behaviour (Kearns and Mason, 2007; Kleinhans and Bolt, 2014), while also promoting an individual sense of security (Forrest and Kearns 2001; Borlini and Memo 2008) the emergence of and to a less clear extent forms of social support and social leverage (Briggs, 1998). The second argument supports that social mix can help counteract negative neighbourhood effects (Musterd and Andersson, 2005) and can serve as a channel of social (Joseph et al., 2007) and bridging capital (Van Eijk, 2010) in urban contexts characterised by constrained social mobility (Galster, 2007; Wilson, 1987). It can also act positively on the reputation of an area upon arrival of higher income individuals (Permentier et al., 2011) although evidence is rather discouraging, at least in Western Europe (Beekman et al., 2001; Helleman and Wassenberg, 2004; Kearns and Mason, 2007). Negative representations can in fact be transferred from the place to the inhabitants thus generating social stigmatisation processes (Hastings, 2004 in Palvarini, 2014) that can be internalised by residents (Hauge and Kolstad 2007 in Palvarini, 2014).

Against the generally positive attitude of urban planners and policy-makers towards social mix, scholars have been challenging the concept of social mix on equity and efficiency grounds³.

What should be stressed is the challenge to actually disentangle the effects produced by social mix from the effects of where and how it is produced (Kearns et al., 2013).

1.1 The analysis of social mixing at the micro-scale and the relevance of community building practices

Several studies (for the UK: Atkinson and Kintrea, 1998; for the US Kleit, 2002, 2008,) show that the degree of social interactions among different groups residing in a common neighbourhood is enhanced if the groups are more mixed at either block- or building-level. As Van Kempen and Bolt (2009) argue, social interaction is more likely to occur among neighbours. Dwellers of homogenous building blocks are therefore unlikely to interact with individuals of different social groups. At the same time, other authors argue that extensive heterogeneity at this scale may come along with growing tensions (Goodchild and Cole 2001; Kleinhans et al. 2007) and excessive scrutiny and stigmatisation (Joseph, 2006, Bacqué et al. 2011).

Various factors can contribute to either of these scenarios thus producing varying degrees of interaction while ultimately fostering social cohesion (Joseph, 2006; Tunstall and Fenton, 2006; Bolt and Kempen, 2011). These include good maintenance of the building and common areas (Jupp, 1999; Martin and Watkinson, 2003), inclusive spatial arrangements (Kearns et al., 2013; Lelévrier, 2013) as well as community development initiatives.

Our contribution reflects specifically on the latter, to explore how and to what extent similar actions can encourage positive interactions at building- and neighbourhood-level.

³ On the most recent literature see: for the UK: Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001; Kearns, 2002; Meen et al. 2005; Cheshire, 2007; for the Netherlands: Ostendorf et al., 2001; Musterd, 2002; Musterd et al., 2003; Van Kempen and Bolt, 2009; in Western Europe: Galster, 2007; in the US: Joseph et al., 2007.

Researchers have underlined the relevance of positive actions to promote residents participation and increasing contact in mixed housing projects (for the UK: Silverman et al. 2006; Camina and Wood 2009; for the US: Chaskin and Joseph, 2010, for Italy: Mugnano and Palvarini 2013).

These actions fall in what is referred to as “community building” (see Naparstek et al. 2000 on the US context) or “community development” (see Popple 2006 on the UK context) strategies. Supporting residents participation, fostering social interactions and networks of support, promoting social integration of specific groups, supporting the institutional infrastructure of communities, promoting common values and norms, improving people's sense of safety and belonging are the main goals of these social and community-based approaches to neighbourhood and housing regeneration (Scottish Homes 2001).

Different actors are involved in their implementation, according to the context: members of the community itself, an agency in charge for the regeneration process, an housing association or else the public administration. Regarding the latter, community development workers are often employed by a local authority in the context of urban regeneration projects in the UK and are considered as a vital resource because of the unique relationship they have normally built with communities over time (Duncan and Thomas 2000).

Scholars who have analyzed community development work empirically highlights both positive impacts and risks. Joseph (2006) stresses how efforts to organise informal events in the building block and in the wider neighbourhood can be crucial in facilitating interpersonal connections and in making common needs and interests emerge. Mugnano and Palvarini (2013) recognise on the one side the positive role of actions aimed at social cohesion in encouraging the constitution of neighbourhood associations. On the other, they underline such associations can fail to be truly inclusive, unless they provide all social groups with equal opportunities to participate, and can promote artificial forms of interaction that do not evolve spontaneously and are likely to dissolve rapidly as a consequence.

Camina & Wood (2009), upon replication of the methodology proposed by Atkinson and Kintrea (2000) report positive results when zooming on three different socially mixed tenures: they confirm that dwellers have shown a strong commitment of interests, following also substantial investment in community development, in terms of helping residents in getting activities going and in running the community halls.

Silverman et al. (2006) highlight how community building activities, including community development work and support to create cross-tenure residents associations, actively contribute to the creation and maintenance of safe, clean and friendly environments.

Brophy and Smith (1997) in their account of successful mixed income housing developments in the US underline the importance of a property manager defining behavioural norms of community, service activities being available and events organised, particularly in multicultural contexts and where children are present.

In spite of the evidence presented, a recent review of the urban and housing studies literature, although not exhaustive, has highlighted little empirical in-depth and ethnographic analysis of projects in their making, on related processes of community development and on the expectations of those involved in shaping them. In this sense the case presented here is rather peculiar, as far as the international debate is concerned.

2. Description and vision of the ViaPadova36 project

ViaPadova36 is a social housing project initiated in spring 2014. It is the continuation of the project Maison du Monde (MdM) which was designed and implemented by Cariplo Bank Foundation in collaboration with Fondazione Housing Sociale⁴. The actual

⁴ In 2000, in face of growing housing deprivation and a lack of resources to contrast it, the Cariplo Bank Foundation launched some social housing projects, including also the Maison du Monde (MdM) one in Via Padova. It consisted in the rehabilitation of a 19th century building that had been donated by artist Marco Mantovani to the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Financially speaking, it comprised investments, through the Social Housing Fund "Fondo Immobiliare Lombardia", by Polaris Real Estate SGR Spa⁴, the Lombardy Region and the Cariplo Bank Foundation itself.

building complex is owned by Abitare Sociale Metropolitano (ASM) - a consortium of four co-operatives⁵ - and Investire Immobiliare SGR SPA⁶.

ViaPD36 aims to provide affordable housing and in particular 22 beds in a social residence, and 41 social renting units to the following target groups:

1. Old occupiers
 - a. elderly and young families that resided in the building prior rehabilitation works and decide to stay (8 units);
2. new occupiers
 - a. families and young couples and specific targets such as divorced fathers with children whose income is too high to allow for social housing access and yet relatively low thus making it difficult to rent in the private market (27 units);
 - b. singles and families with special needs with the aim to promote an autonomous housing career (6 units);
 - c. individuals with low-cost temporary housing needs (workers, students and young people on training courses, relatives of hospitalised patients, etc.) (22 beds);

The project concept involves a social mix based on aspects regarding length of stay, age and nationality - rather than differentiated tenure, as for many social mix projects. Out of 35 units (1a + 2a), 13 are given to families of different nationalities (Sri Lanka, Peru, Morocco, Senegal, Albania), 18 to Italian families and 4 to the “famiglie consapevoli”. All others are for temporary and special supports dwellers.

The old dwellers autonomously decided whether to stay or relocate elsewhere, while the new dwellers were chosen, by means of a selection process, organised by ASM in May 2014. Later in Autumn they were accompanied in taking possession of their flats.

The project concept involves also a functional mix: two shops (a second-hand shop and a fair trade coffee shop) operate on the ground floor of the building. Beyond their

⁵ Consorzio Sistema Imprese Sociali, Consorzio Farsi Prossimo, Cooperativa sociale Chico Mendes onlus, Cooperativa sociale La strada Onlus.

⁶ This resulted out of a merge between Polaris Real Estate SGR Spa and Beni Stabili Gestioni SGR, in January 2015.

commercial aim, these activities are meant to promote sociability and integration while becoming meeting and information spots on “sustainable living”.

ASM will be responsible for the management of the housing complex, together with other social organisations: Cooperativa sociale La Cordata, Cooperativa sociale Filo d’Arianna, Cooperativa sociale La Strada, Cooperativa sociale Farsi Prossimo.

In line with the social housing model promoted by Fondazione Housing Sociale (see Capelli, 2014) ViaPadova36 is characterized by a no profit form of management. This involves a crucial role by the “gestore sociale”, in this case ASM, entrusted with responsibility over “property and facility management” that is to say all activities connected to the building administration and management of relations between occupiers and the building owners. Moreover, the gestore sociale is also assigned a social task associated with community development. As summarized by our Informant of Fondazione Housing Sociale, who followed the MdM phase of the project: *“ViaPadova36 promotes a new social entrepreneurial model, by favouring an integrated, co-ordinated and shared management of the building block, through the involvement of various actors, including the gestore sociale, the owners of the building, the building dwellers, as well as a Community Development Worker and the famiglie consapevoli”* (27 May 2014).

The specific project of ViaPadova36 should *“contribute to activating internal relationships among the project’s dwellers which should in turn contaminate external relationships with neighbours in the wider Via Padova”* (ibidem). Ultimately *“ViaPadova36 [is intended as] a place for the promotion of social, commercial and cultural activities targeted to its dwellers, to the neighbours of Via Padova and those of the wider city, a place where diversity becomes an asset to facilitate social cohesion.”* It promotes a different, more comprehensive concept of housing whereby *“the act of dwelling becomes an instrument to implement socio-educational and pedagogical interventions capable of counteracting social fragmentation in the city”* (ASM Informant, 23 June 2014).

3.1 The context of the project: Via Padova

As the new name given to the project suggests, the building is located in Via Padova (36). This is a four km avenue, located at the centre of a triangle-shaped urban area that connects the centre of Milan to its northern-eastern part. It is delimited by two big avenues, Viale Monza and Viale Palmanova, both ending in Piazzale Loreto. The area articulates in a range of physical, and relational spaces (see Arrigoni, 2011 and Novak and Andriola, 2008) as well as commercial spaces that, particularly in the last decade, have assumed a strong ethnic connotation (Riva and Lucchini, 2013). It has been traditionally an immigration area, with internal flows from the Southern regions of the country, first, and international flows from Europe and other continents starting from the 80's. Its housing stock is very variegated. There is no large social housing estate here. Until the 70's it was a working class neighbourhood. Recently, it has attracted middle class residents, who have settled in apartment blocks that rose up next to poorer and traditional working class buildings. A marked social and functional mix is evident (Arrigoni 2010). The wider neighbourhood has one the highest percentage of immigrant residents at a urban level, corresponding to roughly 34% of the local population (against an average percentage of 19%).⁷ This is why Via Padova is considered as *the* Milanese multiethnic neighbourhood par excellence.

The actual avenue can be roughly divided into 4 sections: the strong symbolical physical boundary represented by the railway bridge separates the first more lively and dense part from the more peripheral one; it is in this "*multiethnic pentagon*" (ibidem, p. 175) that the immigrant population concentrates (up to 50% of immigrant residents live in a few blocks) and is most visible in public space, due to numerous "ethnic" shops and commercial activities – with no consistent concentration of specific geographical origin.

Since 2008, the area has been the object of securitarian unproblematized media narratives (Arrigoni, 2011). A series of criminal events unfolded and culminated in the murder of a young Egyptian man. Via Padova hit the headlines. Episodes of street disturbance and riots followed thus contributing to a negative and stigmatised image

⁷ <http://dati.comune.milano.it/> Resident population at 31/12/13 (accessed on 24th March 2015).

of the neighbourhood. The then centre-right led local administration dealt with emerging problems by introducing measures centred on security and public order, and in particular, ordinances and regulations aimed to limiting shops opening hours. On the contrary, local associations have adopted a different and much more proactive approach. In May 2010, they started organising an annual festival, “Via Padova è meglio di Milano” that has involved more than 50 associations and institutions in promoting social cohesion and trying to overturn the neighbourhood stigma. In October 2014, the association activities were suspended. As recently communicated on their website, the festival will not take place in 2015. While this was officially blamed on the lack of human resources, it seems that internal conflicts have put a strain on the association. Against this scenario, an informal group of people will strive for continuous engagement to prevent the festival, the activities and relationship that have built along it, from dying off completely.

4. Building community in viaPadova36

In this paragraph we will be discussing the role of the CD worker and SC families in the project, by focusing on community development activities, social dynamics and relations that are emerging inside and outside the ViaPadova36 building block.

4.1 The CD Worker and the SC Families

A key part of the ViaPadova36 project is represented by the activation of two typologies of actors: the community development worker (CD Worker)⁸ and the so-called "famiglie consapevoli" (socially-conscious families - SC Families).

The Community Worker is a person with long-term experience in dealing with vulnerable groups and individuals. She acts as a mediator between the occupiers and the building owners, as far as rent payment, reparation works, permissions for the organisation of activities in the building and other administrative duties are concerned.

⁸ We have opted for the term "community development worker" as the actual content of her role resembles, to some extent, to that of community development workers in the UK, although we are aware of the specificities of the British context, as indicated in the literature review.

She operates in an office provided within the building, on set days and office hours. The office has also been made available for actions relating to the promotion of the social-relational aspect of the project, including any activity carried out by the CD Worker to facilitate encounters among dwellers and meetings of the SC Families.

In the first phase of the project, when the old occupiers re-took possession of their flats, the CD Worker was very much present on site. She is still very much available, much more than at set times in order to collect any request and complaint. She describes her presence as vital to "*to keep an eye out for problems at ground level*" and ensure emerging issues are addressed properly (Silverman et al., 2006).

The CD Worker's efforts will be integrated by the voluntary support of SC Families. These are young couples that have joined the project as new dwellers - only one girl in the group is a former occupier of the building. They have been selected by ASM to engage proactively in community development activities. In the words of our Informant, the idea is to count on actual dwellers that stimulate and activate relations from inside the building, someone in the position to concretely experience proximity (ASM Informant, 23 June 2014).

Selection has been based on ad-hoc interviews carried out by the CD Worker with the main aim to evaluate the background and the personal characteristics of applicants, any previous experience of voluntary work, in local associations, etc., their predisposition to engagement in the project and the willingness to be involved.

All the couples are young Italian highly educated and middle-class, aged 20s to 30s. They all share a flat with their partner for the first time. When asked about their motivation to move to ViaPadova36 they all agreed that the building complex offers brand new apartment, although the rent is only relatively cheap (2 March 2014). Interestingly, they all underlined they were all aware of the stigmatized image of Via Padova and the problems it suffered from, while explaining they would have not moved to the area if not to join this project thus taking the opportunity to experiment an alternative form of communal living together with other peer couples.

The SC Families are sensible to social issues and have matured experience as volunteers in their neighbourhood or else their local parish. None of them knew each other before moving to Via Padova 36, but they seem to share the same values. In other words, their profile is rather homogenous. This might facilitate collaboration among them, particularly in as far as they share the same stage in their life-cycle (see also Mugnano and Palvarini, 2013). At the same time, this contradicts the actual goal of the project to promote social cohesion in a diverse context. In fact, they scarcely represent the rich diversity of the building, in terms of age, geographical origin, nationality and other socio-economic characteristics, particularly if we consider those of older occupiers that include elderly families too.

Contrary to the CD Worker, that is an external presence, the SC Families will be regularly on-site, as they are themselves occupiers, and will be ideally a constant point of reference for all the people that now live in Via Padova 36, thus facilitating relationships and mediating in everyday practical issues and conflicts.

In the original project plan, the SC Families were going to be trained for their role. However, soon after the project opening event, on November 21st 2014, they expressed the wish to start meeting and activating rapidly hence the training phase was eventually overlooked. To date they have not been giving precise tasks. During an informal discussion with them (March 2nd 2015), they stressed that spontaneity would best characterise their involvement and that they prefer engaging "*without a pre-constituted frame*". To what extent such involvement is spontaneous is, however, a matter of discussion. As anticipated, it is part of a well-defined project vision and, for three of the couples, it followed a selection of candidates, although they all expressed a strong desire and motivation to engage since their arrival in the building. Only one couple added to the group voluntarily, after moving in. Additionally, it was the *gestore sociale*, not the ViaPadova36 occupiers, that chose them. Their legitimacy might be affected by this factor and their capacity to activate relationships accordingly.

4.2 Living together in the building block

Common spaces were mentioned as factors facilitating encounters. An example is the Fondazione Mantovani Hall, located in the building estate. However, before rehabilitation, it was used for artistic exhibitions and an open access to dwellers and visitors might prove risky for the preservation of installations on display, which is why the owner, the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, is showing some resistance to make the spaces available for the organisation of events. The building complex comprises also two shops, both facing the street. In the project vision they somehow added to the "common spaces" and were intended as promoter of an ethical form of living, that could be vehiculated through the organisation of seminars and events.

In our first encounter with our ASM Informant, she reported on ASM plan to elaborate a "patto di convivenza" (cohabitation pact) with the involvement of the SC Families and of all other occupiers. According to the original idea this was intended as a set of rules touching upon different aspects of pacific cohabitation. The regulation of everyday contacts are arguably a crucial issue towards building social cohesion: *"through them people can learn tolerance, co-operation and acquire a sense of social order and belonging"* (see Forrest and Kearns, 2001 p. 2130). When explicitly asked about it, two SC Families said that no need had emerged to regulate everyday life. The very few complaints they had heard from neighbours (such as people smoking in the corridor) were effectively addressed by facilitating informal confrontations among them. Generally speaking they described the building as conflict-free. It is questionable whether, in face of a possible increase of complaints in the future, informal confrontations might suffice. At the same time a "cohabitation pact" might not be welcomed by the old occupiers: they have been living with rules introduced (and accepted?) long before their re-settlement and might not be willing to new negotiations. Their life in the building has been punctuated by the concierge. He has long been working, on a full-time basis, in the building and was the right-arm of artist Marco Mantovani, the previous owner of the building. Old dwellers are used to his presence and consider him as a reference point. On his side he feels particularly responsible for them (field note, 21 November 2014) - hence he is likely to have a strong voice in any negotiations occurring within the building. What needs to be

stressed is that he has always perceived the building as an "elegant building" and is eager to do anything to preserve this character that might of course clash with some community development activities' vision.

4.3. Becoming neighbours in and outside ViaPadova36

Old dwellers had long been living in the building, well before the refurbishment took place, and were the first to (re)settle in their flat. They might not understand nor be ready to accept the any proposal put forward by the SC Families. Their efforts to bring the community together might be experienced as a nuisance, as the actual SC Families are hypothesising themselves. They reported, for example, having tried to involve old occupiers in the Christmas party, in December 2014, but with little results. When they actually rang their bell they did not always meet a welcoming response. Some of the occupiers did not even open the door. Only a few of them eventually participated (field note, 19 March 2015). Their resilience to involvement was explained in view of the consistent discomfort caused by the rehabilitation works: only a short notice was given by Polaris that rehabilitation was going to take place, with no chance to negotiate and very little time to decide whether to move to a temporary dwelling and return upon completion of the works or else relocate. Moreover, while financial support was provided for temporary relocation, it did not sufficiently compensate the inconveniences suffered by occupiers, including the "loss" of some long-term neighbours that chose to relocate. Recognition of the importance of community development actions in fostering social cohesion strongly underpins ViaPadova36, in a way that emphasises the need for occupiers to be guided in their path to become "good" neighbours and active dwellers: *"the idea is for residents to understand the added value of organising things themselves including cultural activities but also other forms of collaboration."* (Informant Fondazione Housing Sociale, 27 May 2014). The SC Families seem to be at ease and enthusiastic with their task and not feel too "wedged" in their role. As one of girls commented, when asking about her feelings she replied: *"there are no obligations for us"* (field note, 19 March 2015).

All the couples work full time (with one exception) and it is difficult for them to meet regularly. This is why they have decided to meet every two weeks to ensure a regular engagement on community life.

Each individual background plays a role in the way they approach community: some of them are more proactive in proposing activities and events, others are more focussed on "low-profile" opportunities to meet occupiers. The activities they are planning include: cinema sessions in the courtyard; a community dinner; after-school activities for a small group of secondary school children. This initiative has met the enthusiasm of immigrant families that were in search of such a support.

While the CDW and the SC Families will promote encounters and the construction of ties among dwellers in the block and in the neighbourhood, through the organisation of events and activities, "it will not be these actions per se to bring dwellers together. In their view, it will be their shared values, their motivations and above all the desire to experiment together a different lifestyle" (Informant ASM, 23 June 2014) (see also Dekker & Bolt, 2005; Kearns & Forrest, 2000).

As far as the organisation of activities is concerned, prior permission must be obtained by the building owners. So far they have been dealt with by the CD Worker with , but this might change as the frequency of activities increase and the typologies diversify. Alongside the lack of a dedicated budget it might discourage the activation of the SC Families.

Active efforts are being made by the SC Families to seize opportunities to bring the neighbourhood into the building and viceversa: for example a recent contact with a local writer who will be volunteering on a guide tour of Via Padova - in the context of "Piacere Milano"⁹ - has resulted in informal agreements to end up the actual tour in Via Padova 36, with a final buffet, an opportunity to opening the building and its dwellers to visitors and the neighbourhood.

One of the challenges that the ViaPadova36 project intends to take up relates to the neighbourhood in which it is located, the multiethnic and stigmatised Via Padova.

⁹ Piacere Milano is an initiative of "collaborative tourism" created and implemented by two cooperatives...

ViaPadova36 was first presented to local residents, when the project started. Right at that time, the CD Worker started getting in touch with the group of association "Via Padova è meglio di Milano", that had been active in the area in order to take part in meetings, get involved and link up to members. In the last edition of the festival, in May 2014, the court of ViaPadova36 was opened up to visits and activities were organised for children.

Another presentation was organised later, on November 21st, in occasion of the project opening event, although it was largely targeted to the press (field notes, 21 November 2014). Other presentations were organised in coincidence with the opening of the two shops. Apart from this there have been scarcely any (planned) contact between the occupiers of the Via Padova 36 building and neighbours of the area.

Recently, the SC Families, one in particular, have joined the Social Street "Via Padova (from Piazzale Loreto to Via Giacosa) e dintorni", through friends that put them in touch. Social streets are local groups Facebook-based which have spread in Italian cities from 2014. Their aim is to "*establish ties, share needs, exchange skills, knowledge and create collective projects of common interest drawing all the advantages from an increased social interaction*"¹⁰. It was launched by a few young people that were eager to get to know neighbours and socialize with them in a context, that of a section of Via Padova where people have been lamenting noise and disturbances for inappropriate behaviour in public space.

The aim of the group is to facilitate encounter and exchange among residents living in the first section of via Padova, from Piazzale Loreto to via Giacosa and the surrounding streets. In order to achieve this goal, the group is currently planning to organise activities such as courses, pub crawls, dinner events and trips outside the city.

Considering the socio-economic profile of the members of the social street, we wonder how the efforts of the famiglie consapevoli to open up to the neighbourhood might evolve. Social, economic and ethnic diversity frequently translate into different activity

¹⁰ For more details see <http://www.socialstreet.it/> (accessed on 24th March 2015)

patterns, as observed by various authors (Arthurson, 2012; Atkinson & Kintrea, 2000; Kleinhans, Priemus, & Engbersen, 2007; Van Beckhoven & Van Kempen, 2003;) and homogeneity among the members might end up promoting activities that scarcely include some local groups, thus producing a form of "elective belonging" (Savage, 2008). It clearly depends also on their capacity to intercept the large variety of individuals and groups that live and have been active in Via Padova. In spite of on-going conflicts, the above mentioned coordination of associations "Via Padova è meglio di Milano", with whom the CDW was eager to collaborate, represented a platform for the whole neighbourhood or at least was very much engaged in this direction. On the contrary, the social street seems to suffer, at least at the time being, from a very low representativeness of the neighbourhood and does not seem to be harnessing from the experience of local associations.

Conclusions

This contribution aimed to present the ViaPadova36 social housing project while reflecting on community development activities and the role of two specific actors, the CD Worker and the SC Families. Our main scope was to investigate how and to what extent these actors might contribute to the project goals, as set on paper, that is to say to the promotion of social cohesion. Ideally, comparative research will be carried out based on the same methodological approach, to further investigate community development activities as implemented in housing projects in Milan, given the scarcity of evidence in the literature and the vast array of relevant projects in the city.

Considering the timing of the actual project, that is currently on its initial phase, it is premature to advance any definite conclusion. However, in light of the empirical evidence collected and presented so far, some preliminary reflections and critical comments can be put forward.

As argued above, the SC families share a very similar socio-economic profile which appears to be scarcely coherent with the project objective to strive for social cohesion in a diverse context. A closer look to the project highlights also the fact that particular focus on numerous specific micro-categories of social groups is magnifying diversity in

the building, by over-labelling its dwellers. The SC families do not seem to be aware of this, nor the CD Worker. Yet it might run counter the promotion of a cohesive community by stimulating practices of distinction (Lamont, Molnar, 2002) alongside conflicts, as well as relationships based on assistance rather than mutual help and solidarity, between young and elderly dwellers and between dwellers and dwellers with special need; or else provoke (perceived or actual) power imbalances between those who engage in community development (SC families) and those who do not (all other dwellers).

Another critical aspect concerns the SC families' approach. It very much recalls a top-down dynamic in engineering social relations. We do not know what impact they will have on community development nor what forms of solidarity their engagement might generate but it is legitimate to wonder how their role will evolve over time, particularly in the long-term. It is unclear to what extent they will be guided by the CD Worker, or act autonomously or else try and create the conditions for all dwellers to be active in the project. A risk is certainly evident for the CD Worker to impose her personalistic approach that could in turn clash with that of the SC families. At the same time, the co-existence of their roles might eventually throw confusion thus making it unclear to dwellers who acts as a contact point and how. Needless to say, either roles might not be legitimated in the first place.

As the CD Worker and the SC families acknowledge themselves, the outcome of their action is largely unforeseeable, in spite of any effort on their side. It partly depends on factors they cannot control, including multiple ownership and dwellers' engagement. As for the former, the organisation of any activity will have to be authorized by both owners and this involved a shared vision of the project that might not be confirmed over time. As for the latter, the outcomes of community development actions will depend also on the willingness of dwellers to get involved.

In this sense, a limit of our contribution relates precisely to the absence of the dwellers' voice, as so far they were not available to share their experience. Of course, as the research progresses, they will be included. However, we believe it is crucial to follow these projects in their making, as the temporal dimension provides with a rich

array of information (Marzorati, 2014), including the extent to which dwellers and any actor are more or less available to share their stories.

The SC families have depicted a conflict-free scenario at the time being. Of course, the absence of conflicts does not per se foster social cohesion (see Mugnano e Palvarini, 2013). On the contrary, it might suggest that occupiers are leading parallel lives. It is again too early to draw any conclusion. Dwellers do not know each other yet, they have only been in the building for a very short period and it takes time for encounters to occur and relationships to develop, although it can be anticipated that relationships between old and new dwellers are likely to face some challenges connected to a different perception of the building and on different motivations that brought them to settle or else re-settle in Via Padova 36.

As explained in the paper, the project goal to promote social cohesion reaches beyond the building complex to comprise the wider area of Via Padova. Based on the current evidence, and in particular the experience of Via Padova è meglio di Milano coming to an end and the emergence of the social street “Via Padova (from Piazzale Loreto to Via Giacosa) e dintorni”, we are prone to expect that engagement will largely concern a group of young people with a very homogeneous profile to that of the SC families thus again running counter the social mix principle of the project. Of course, each individual's personal background and life trajectory will clearly play a crucial role in the way they will chose to be involved in community development and in the strategies they enact to foster place attachment and relational ties (see Lelévrier 2013, Valentine 2008). However, our prime concern recalls the criticism advanced by Cheshire (2012): does the use of mixing as an antidote to negative neighbourhood effects overlook the actual problem of increasing income inequality, thus diverting attention away from it? Drawing from Bricocoli and Cucca (2014), it seems that social mix in this project is not performed to act on neighbourhood effects but rather in a rhetoric that sustains the benefits of a diverse urban environment in response to the housing needs of the vulnerable middle class. If this approach will be consistent over the project progress, we believe that little room will be available to even just expect the negative image of

the neighbourhood to be effectively problematised and the human and infrastructural resources of Via Padova to be put to value.

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