

# How do we design a habitat?

## Influence and implications of urban design in territorial, social, economic and environmental sustainability

### Dossier editorial

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This thematic dossier of the journal *CIDADES, Comunidades e Territórios* proposes a space for reflection and discussion, national or international, of housing and habitat, focusing particularly on the “influence and implications of urban design in territorial, social, economic and environmental sustainability”, a mighty long subtitle that aims to express the complex and multifold aspects that need to be contemplated when approaching the habitat notion.

We live in a time when the importance of housing is increasingly acknowledged, but discussion needs to move forward beyond housing and towards the creation of habitat, discussing the production of overall inhabited and collective space. We must consider the political, urban and social conditions that determine both directly and indirectly the features of domestic space and its corresponding habitat, reaching out to other realms such as ecology, health and well-being indicators. It is not unprecedented that housing becomes a key subject in architectural and political agendas, scholarly debates and civil society, but unlike, for instance, the 1960s, this time discussion is not focusing on the habitat, i.e. on the conditions that people encounter when they leave the house, where they are to work, to shop, to meet friends or to enjoy their free time. Social customs and habits keep changing and evolving, but the expression of these as habitat elements remains underexplored, as if people were again being seen as “things to be put in drawers”, as Sociologist Isabel Guerra – one of the founders of *Sociedade e Território* – has denounced long ago. The postponement of the habitat discussion will have negative outcomes in the transformation of the territory. We risk, once again, to house people in wastelands where nothing but tenements (or piles of houses) are to be found, without a proper public realm through which to become part of ‘the city’.

Looking back into CIAM IX, the habitat concept was defined as “an environment that may shelter the ‘harmonious spiritual, intellectual and physical realization of its inhabitants’”. In 1960, the Portuguese National Architects Union (SNA) also expressed concern for the relationship between habitat and housing, conducting studies on liveability and integration of urban housing estates, namely in its first Colloquium titled “Social aspects in habitat conception”. For the architects of this era, ‘habitat’ had many definitions, but as an operative concept, it is unmistakably pointed towards collective life and the complement of domestic activities with additional ones, including leisure and production.

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Six decades later, through the most recent Portuguese Housing Act, habitat is defined as “the territorial and social context outside the house in which it is placed, namely regarding the surrounding space, the collective equipment and infrastructure, as well as the access to fundamental public services and networks of transportation and communication”. But are the urban developments being promoted in response to this Housing Act living up to this expectation?

The lasting importance of these themes is evidenced not only by public discussion, but also by several international official agendas, namely the ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, the ‘2030 Housing Agenda’, the ‘New Urban Agenda - Habitat III’, the ‘New European Bauhaus’ and the ‘Green New Deal for Europe’.

While, in the past, architectural professionals, individually or in groups, sought to reflect upon the habitat concept and to readjust their practices in order to accommodate its demands, is architecture today ready to face the wider challenges that its production will impact? Hence we propose that urban design must be a field of affirmation for housing and habitat, questioning:

What is its repercussion on the construction of the city? What is the influence of these concepts in architecture? How can the habitat concept contribute to improving housing conditions and programmes? What are the impacts of housing in improving conditions of life and public health? How do social, economic and environmental transformations find expression in housing space? How has housing space responded to such transformations? What has been the role of instruments for planning and territorial management?

In response to these questions, various papers from the fields of history, architecture, urbanism, landscaping, geography, public policy and sociology were submitted, presenting different approaches and scales that reflected on the role of urban design in housing and habitat.

The paper “Playgrounds as meeting places: Postwar experimentations and contemporary perspectives on the design of in-between areas in residential complexes”, by Giuseppe Resta and Fabiana Dicuonzo, explores the post-war playground projects that tested the first forms of participatory design and community responsibility, taking on the role of ‘aesthetic operators’, underpinned by an analysis of experimental projects carried out in the 1950s-70s by Lady Allen of Hurtwood, Riccardo Dalisi, Aldo van Eyck and Group Ludic.

Inês Nunes, with the paper “Towards La Charte de l’Habitat: Jane Drew pioneering a ‘more humane architecture’ in Chandigarh”, wrote about the C.I.A.M. (*Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne*) new paradigms towards housing and city, particularly the Aix-en-Provence Congress (1953), entitled La Charte de l’Habitat, and the experience of Chandigarh’s masterplan. Based on the consultation of Drew’s unpublished archives and on a field trip to Chandigarh, the author points to Drew’s social discourses, suggesting her innovative contribution to a redirection within Modernism and a ‘more humane architecture’, framed by the discussion around the concept of ‘habitat’.

Still on India’s territory, Bhagyashree Ramakrishna and Shruthi Ramesh, present “Contentions of affordability in the habitat planning of a new town: A case of Navi Mumbai, India”, aiming to discuss how masterplans can further socio-economic segregations and exposing the impact of neoliberal changes on affordable housing. From the city of Navi Mumbai – an expression of India’s euphoria as a newly independent nation and an example of pragmatic urban planning whose shortcomings in this domain continue to be clear five decades later – the paper examines the spatial logics of housing in changing economic conditions and embedded spatial inequalities, and centres on the type of housing that has been built in India for inhabitants from lower economic and social backgrounds.

On the issue of rural habitat, Angel Stive Castañeda Rodríguez presents some results of his research on the paper “Social housing in the production of rural habitat in agrarian reform territories in the west of the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil”. This research was carried out in three agrarian reform settlements in the state of São Paulo, a territory characterized by the intensification of the struggle for land and its precarious conditions and marked by the lack of infrastructure, services, support for production and housing. It sought to demonstrate the relevance of social housing in the production of rural habitat in Brazilian agrarian reform territories, based on the processes and contradictions inherent to its implementation.

The paper “An indigenous horticultural project in Rio de Janeiro as a gap in formal urban space:

the case of the Dja Guata Porã Garden”, by Camila Bevilaqua Afonso and Priscila Martins de Melo, discusses formal urban space. Based on an ethnographic study of a unique indigenous horticulture project in the centre of Rio de Janeiro, the authors question generic and mass-market forms of architecture through an oppositional relationship with the self-built spaces of indigenous people, demonstrating the effort to build a territory organized around multi-species relationships approach.

João Silva Leite and Filipa Serpa reflect, in the paper “Between the Domestic and the Urban. Transition systems as a space for collective living”, about the relevance of transitional spaces in collective housing buildings and how they can contribute to the construction of systems of spatial continuity between the urban and the domestic. Through the morphological decomposition of the permanence and distribution systems of residential buildings, and by interpreting them as a thick threshold, the research aims to open up a debate in architectural production on the importance of systems as transitional devices, but also on the structures that articulate and expand public and domestic space, activating the habitat and making it more integrated and continuous.

The dossier closes with an interview and a book review. The interview, conducted by Ana Esteves in June 2021 and February 2023, is entitled “*A produção de cidade e o direito a habitá-la. Uma conversa em dois momentos com Ermínia Maricato*” (The production of the city and the right to inhabit it. A two-part conversation with Ermínia Maricato, in English). The book review written by Sara Silva Lopes presents the book *Cities and Affordable Housing: Planning, Design and Policy Nexus*, edited by architect, professor and researcher Sasha Tsenkova.

With this thematic dossier we intend to provide a panoramic perspective over the role of urban design in housing and habitat and to establish a base for discussion on the subject.

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