

High-rise housing in Europe

Current trends and future prospects



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6 Italy

High-rise as an urban way of life since the Roman Empire

Marco Cremaschi

6.1 Introduction

Most people in Italy live in flats (see Table 6.1), which make up 54% of the total dwelling stock compared with detached houses (30%) or semi-detached houses (14%). More than 90% of flats are located in the metropolitan core, whereas houses are more typical in the suburbs or in small villages. Although flats are smaller than houses, dwelling conditions remain good and are above the average for the total stock (Cremaschi, 1996).

Defined as 6 storeys or above, Italy's four million high-rise flats (Table 6.2) are a common feature of the main metropolitan areas and are not exclusively associated with the social-housing sector (Ferracuti & Marcelloni, 1982; Padovani, 1984; 1996; Tosi, 1990). Built mostly in the post-war years, and on the periphery of industrial towns, such areas provided a 'learning experience' for new immigrants to the city. Many post-war films by 'neo-realismo' directors, or by Pasolini (Fofi, 1982) used them as a backdrop to narrating the tough apprenticeship of arrivals from deprived rural regions to such cities as Rome, Milan and Turin.

Regional variations in dwelling type are very marked in Italy. For example, the proportion of single-family houses varies from 17% in the industrial regions of the north-west to 40% in the rural and tourist south; from 7.7% in the cities to 40% in non-urban municipalities. The distribution of high-rise housing provides an even greater contrast. In the five main cities of Rome, Milan, Turin, Naples and Palermo, the proportion averages close to 35%, and they account for 40% of the national high-rise stock. It is interesting to note that Rome and Milan have a large proportion of pre-Second World War high-rise housing (at 18% and 10% respectively) and together have 28% of the total high-rise stock, equivalent to 1.1 million flats.

High-rise housing is not an issue per se in Italy, although issues have evolved and developed around it over time. For example, early criticism of the 'spatial enclosure' of high-rise estates has diminished where external areas have been transformed and social integration increased (Höllinger & Haller, 1990). Although the location and segregation of estates remain major issues, concerns must be viewed in a broader policy context. For example, the labelling of high-rise estates as 'deprivation areas' is related to a wider concern over social exclusion, and concern over their location is one dimension of a 'peripheral areas' issue concerned with inequalities in metropolitan areas.

High-rise neighbourhoods only became the subject of special interest when



Population	57,715,625
Population density	192/km ²
Capital	Rome
GDP per capita	€17,514
Housing stock	25 million

Table 6.1 Number and percentage of dwellings by type of building in Italy, 1991

Building type	Buildings	Dwellings	% of dwellings
H o u s e s			
Single-family houses	7,578,575	7,578,575	30.3
Two-family houses	1,732,655	3,465,309	13.7
Rural houses	457,500	457,500	1.8
F l a t s			
3-8 dwellings per building	1,402,000	5,951,345	23.8
9-15 dwellings per building	240,000	3,142,060	12.6
16-30 dwellings per building	131,000	2,656,948	10.6
More than 30 dwellings per building	57,000	1,776,785	7.1
Total	11,598,730	25,028,522	100

Source: author's calculation based on the 1991 Census

Table 6.2 Total dwelling stock, number and percentage of high-rise housing in Italy, 1951-1991

Census	Housing stock	Dwellings in high-rise buildings ^a	% of high-rise housing on total dwellings
1951	11,411,000	370,000	3.2
1961	14,214,000	1,340,000	9.4
1971	17,434,000	2,790,000	16.0
1981	21,937,000	3,690,000	16.8
1991	25,030,000	3,970,000	15.9

* Six storeys, plus ground floor, upwards.

Source: author's calculation based on the 1991 Census

attention turned to urban renewal in the early 1990s. Just a few high-rise districts present really problematic conditions, the 'Zen' estate in Palermo, 'Secondigliano' in Naples, 'Tor Bella Monaca' in Rome, 'Japigia' in Bari and a few neighbourhoods in Turin, Genoa and Milan are considered the worst examples in Italy. However, they are typical of neither social-housing estates nor peripheral residential areas, and problems are just as likely to be found in historic city centres in Genoa, Naples or Palermo.

This chapter addresses those situations in which the spatial segregation of high-rise housing, especially stock in the social sector, coincides with urban deprivation to generate a deeper sense of social exclusion. As we shall see, the Italian experience provides some mixed conclusions.

6.2 The origins of high-rise housing

Although the mass production of high-rise housing is a recent phenomenon (Table 6.3), urban development in Italy has long been associated with multi-storey living. For example, during the Roman Empire, the citizens of the capital were accustomed to living in dwellings (*insulae*) of 7-8 storeys or above (Carcopino, 1940). By 1945, in Rome and Milan, almost 200,000 flats were concentrated in high-rise buildings, approximately 6-7% of their present dwelling stock.

Such housing originated at the end of the nineteenth century when comfortable 5-6 storey flats were built in 'modern' residential districts encircling the historic cores of many towns. Such areas are now part of central business or

Table 6.3 Dwellings in high-rise buildings* by period of construction for Rome and Milan

	Dwellings in high-rise buildings	%	Dwelling stock	%
R o m e				
Before 1919	21,643	4.2	123,477	7.6
1919-1945	71,686	13.8	183,006	11.3
1946-1961	146,799	28.3	390,682	24.1
1961-1971	166,109	32.0	481,219	29.6
1971-1981	67,502	13.0	299,867	18.5
up to 1991	45,872	8.8	145,580	9.0
Total	519,611	100	1,623,831	100
M i l a n				
Before 1919	14,086	2.4	178,257	11.1
1919-1945	44,526	7.5	191,640	11.9
1946-1961	147,487	24.9	366,626	22.8
1961-1971	255,318	43.1	482,298	30.0
1971-1981	79,351	13.4	219,149	13.6
up to 1991	51,442	8.7	168,384	10.5
Total	592,210	100	1,606,354	100

*Six storeys, plus ground floor, upwards.

Source: author's calculation based on the 1991 Census

residential districts, and are often fashionable neighbourhoods for the upper classes. High-rise construction developed on a large-scale after the Second World War, when new blue-collar belts were added to these earlier middle class developments (Coppo & Cremaschi, 1994).

Post-war mass housing was the result of national policies and private sector activity. Both public and private sectors were concerned with the provision of low-cost dwellings, especially for rural migrant workers moving to large and medium sized urban areas. Compared with the poor conditions from which they had come, life as an industrial worker in a modern flat was highly valued and a much improved position.

Initially, high-rise living was compared unfavourably with previous – and idealised – rural lifestyles, and urbanists in the modernist tradition expressed concern about its social and economic costs. Fears were raised that high-rise housing would be socially and technically unsuitable for the new 'urbanites', and its alleged social mix might jeopardise their 'morals' (Piccinato, 1946). Measured by density of people per hectare, high-rise had only a narrow competitive advantage over medium-rise housing which became the typical urban form. For example, more than 40% of dwellings in Milan's Lombardia, the first urban industrial area in Italy, are in blocks of only 4 storeys or less (Cremaschi, 1996).

During the first period of growth from the 1950s to 1964, the number of high-rise flats grew from approximately 135,000 in 1951 to 379,000 ten years later (Padovani, 1996). Almost 50% of all high-rise housing was built between the early 1960s and mid-1970s, with the metropolitan areas taking most new production (46%), and population growth (39%). Public investment in new housing declined from 25% of total output in 1951 to 6% in the period 1961-1965. As public finance diminished, local authorities became more involved in promoting low-cost home ownership, mainly through the provision of land. In 1962, local authorities were authorised to purchase, even by compulsory means, large tracts of land for social and low cost housing, and all major cities took advantage of this power.

Social-housing estates in Genoa (by Antida Gazzola)

Genoa is an older industrialised city in the north of Italy with a population of about 670,000 inhabitants. PraVoltri and Begato are estates located in the western suburbs of the city, and have populations of about 20,000 and 10,000 inhabitants respectively. Both were built on public land under the Social Housing Act (Law 167/1962), partly by private individuals who joined co-operative societies in partnership with local authorities ('edilizia convenzionata'), and partly by state-supported social-housing agencies ('edilizia sovvenzionata') which are wholly subsidised. Most of the housing was built in the 1970s and 1980s, about one third of which consists of blocks with 6 or more storeys (mostly social sector), combined with semi-detached houses and three-storey buildings (usually privately or co-operatively owned). Most high-rise blocks, (of up to 24 storeys and referred to as the 'towers'), are in the social sector, and their populations have lower incomes than the rest of the neighbourhood.

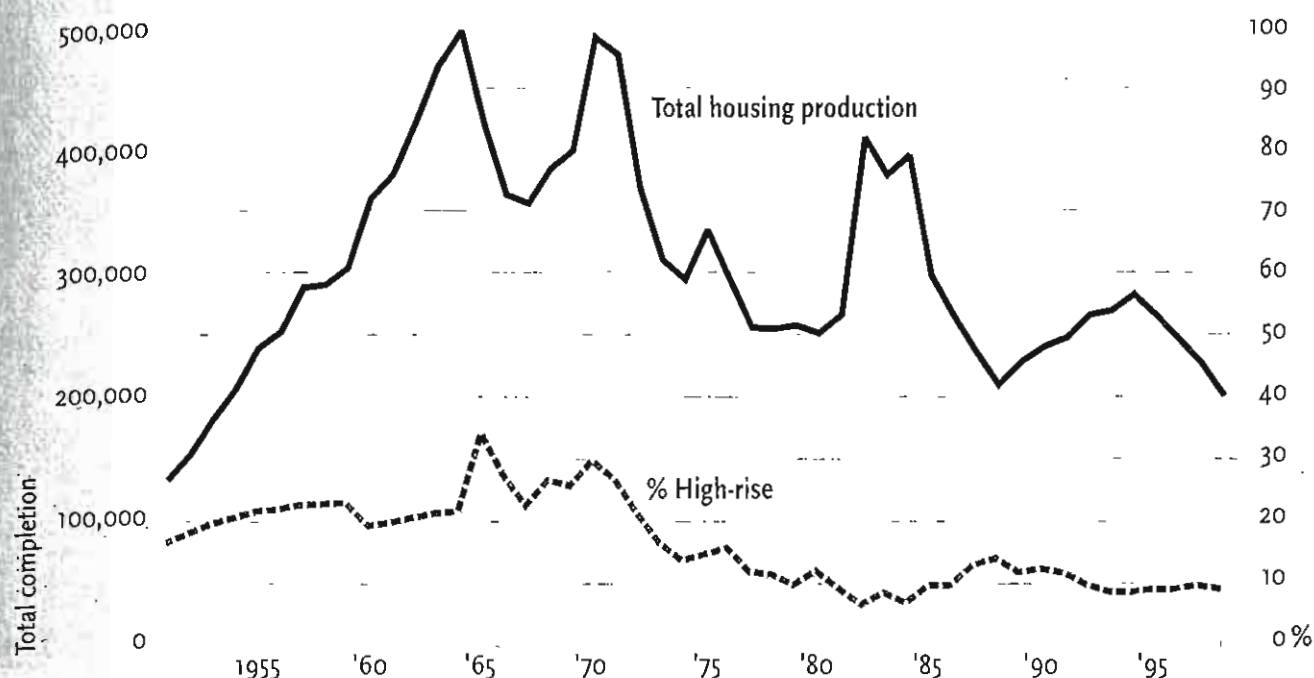
One of the present and future problems is the allocation system for social-housing which excludes the 'real' poor in greatest need, such as the homeless and immigrants from non-EU countries, whose numbers are increasing rapidly (Tosi, 1994). In the public estates, there are frequent problems with the administration of the blocks and the provision of services which may be obsolete, absent or inadequate for the aged and those with changing aspirations. There are also problems with organised crime and with unemployment, especially among the young. So far, the only action taken has been the privatisation of part of the social-housing stock and the provision of day-to-day maintenance. The debate about the future of spaces between blocks is still continuing, with possible solutions including the provision of new social or private sector dwellings or a combination of both sectors; providing green space, private gardens or play equipment etc. The upgrading of these estates will depend on the capacity of the local administration, and on the viability of reversing the unintended creation of single function estates.

Although it was common for high-density estates to be built on comparatively cheaper peripheral sites, public and private developers operated in different locations. The post-war policy of 'housing for the working class' resulted in the mass construction of multi-dwelling social-housing estates in outer and isolated locations. Speculative private sector developments followed, filling the gap between the centre and the peripheral ring, on land already provided with an infrastructure.

6.3 The development of high-rise housing

The second period of high-rise construction took place between 1964 and 1977-78, with a peak in 1970. Another peak occurred between 1982 and 1984, and even though the number of social rented completions has declined continuously since 1981, a state supported housing programme has continued. Whilst allocations remain under municipal control, local housing agencies have responsibility for construction, management and maintenance. Such agencies were almost compelled, by a combination of land costs and limited technical experience to opt for high-rise blocks, and as a result, such housing constituted 80% of social sector output during the 1980s. Whilst housing output has varied over the last fifteen years, the high-rise completion rate has remained constant at about 25-30,000 flats per year (Figure 6.1)

Figure 6.1 Total housing production and proportion of high-rise in Italy, 1951-1998



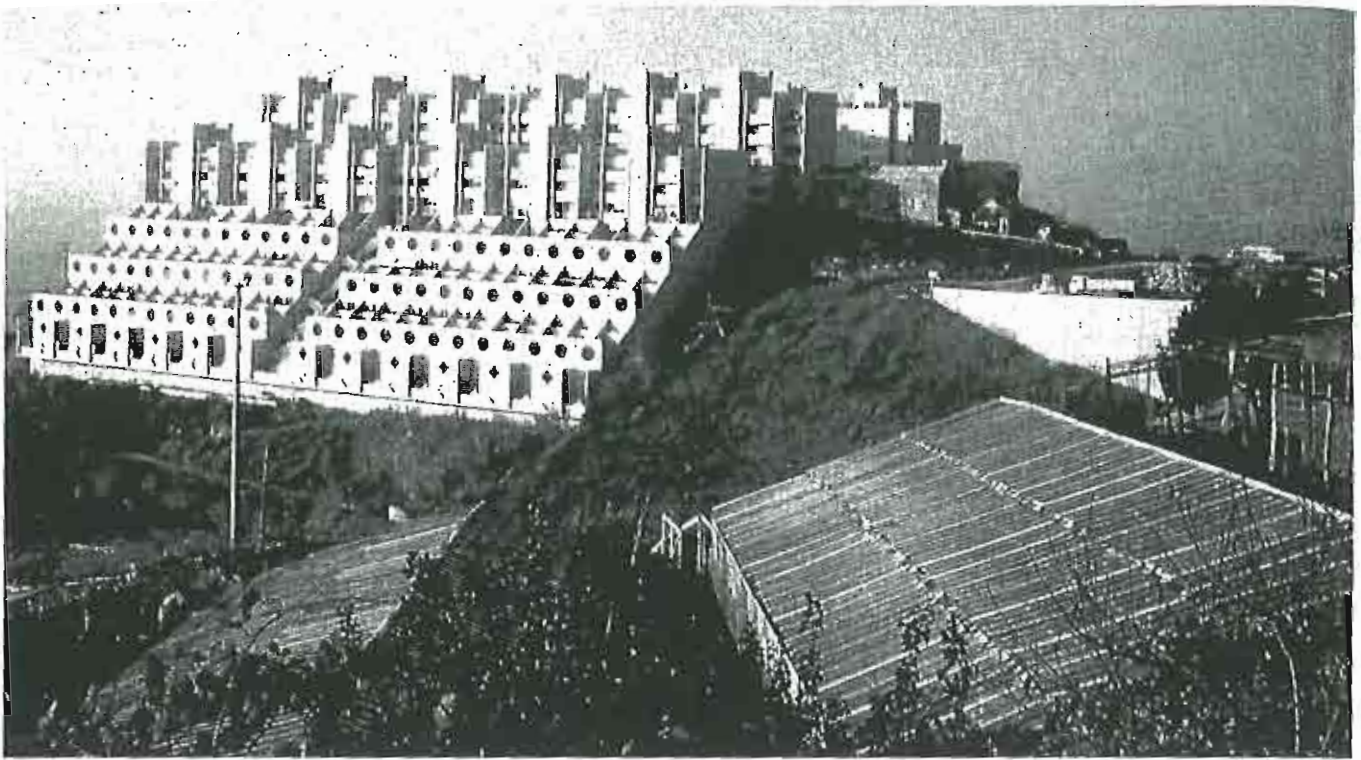
Source: Estimation on Istat (National Institute of Statistics), Cresme, Padovani

In a more recent attempt to halt the decline of the major metropolitan areas, public subsidies have been provided to build private housing for those unable to afford market rents. This policy produced an increase in private sector high-rise completions in the late 1980s, and resulted in a wave of middle class family households moving from peripheral neighbourhoods to new outer urban estates. Consequently, new private rented and high-rise housing has been used as a tool to support urban housing markets, and the state's withdrawal from providing social housing for those unable to afford a home has been matched by the provision of subsidies for the middle classes.

The continued construction of high-rise housing contrasts with the growing trend of families building their own conventional homes. Such an activity is quite common in Italy, especially in the countryside. Over the past 15 years, construction by families has accounted for at least 30% of new housing (CRESME, 1998), a trend accompanied by an increase in movement beyond the metropolitan areas in search of better housing conditions. If these trends continue, the high-rise share of dwelling production will continue to decline.

Due to poor municipal record keeping and the extent of informal and illegal house building, data on total completions are considered to be underestimates. In particular, official data on high-rise are believed to underestimate the level of construction by almost one third, a problem especially relevant to the major period of high-rise construction in the 1960s and 1970s.

However, each national census records the number of buildings of 16 dwellings or more and which are assumed to consist of 4 storeys or above. The 1991 census recorded 188,000 such buildings providing approximately 4.4 million homes. It is further estimated that almost 150,000 high-rise buildings of 6 storeys or above provide homes for 3.9 million dwellings, or nearly 16% of total dwellings.



Late high-rise schemes in Genova: Pegli 3. Photo by Roberto Bobbio

6.4 The social characteristics of high-rise neighbourhoods

In Italy, social housing is intended to house the urban poor and tenants are selected according to such criteria as having a low income, reaching old age or eviction from the private sector. Consequently, social-housing neighbourhoods and public sector high-rise estates house more people at risk of poverty (Mingione & Zajczyk, 1992). In Italy, such groups appear less conspicuous and less concentrated than in other European countries, although urban poverty is greater and more concentrated in the southern cities.

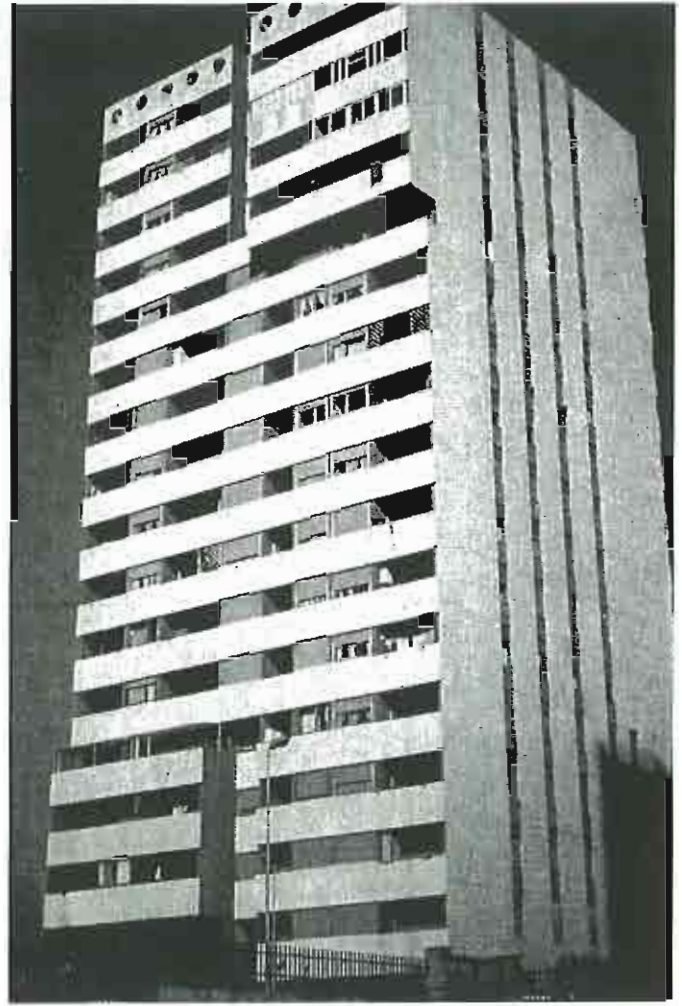
The populations of social-housing neighbourhoods are mostly very stable, and eviction is unusual, even when family income has increased beyond the eligibility level. The consequences of this practice are twofold: on the one hand, and to the detriment of the public finances, many social-housing flats are occupied by people paying a lower rent than they can afford. On the other hand, upward mobility can create a mixture of tenants, and contrasts with the social uniformity generated by applying strict allocations criteria. Where turnover is very low, the resulting population stability encourages the development of social cohesion and growing older together may have the unintended consequence of making communities stronger.

Whilst the inhabitants of social sector high-rise housing tend to be poorer and more deprived than average, a mixture of social rented, private rented, co-operative and owner-occupied housing is quite common in the later and larger estates. In 'Piani di zona' (public land for social-housing and partially subsidised housing), the main tenure is co-operative ownership (35-50%), and the share of social housing falls in the range 20-40%. Such (mainly high-rise) neighbourhoods are larger than either public or private housing estates.

Building type and housing tenure tend to coincide on different housing

Late high-rise schemes
in Rome: Serpentara.
Photo by Alessandro Calabrò

estates. In Brescia, for example, and despite efforts to avoid social segregation, an official report has identified that: "the social rented sector is concentrated in high-rise blocks; subsidised private rented in some low-rise buildings; whereas owner-occupied and co-operative-owned sector preferred semi-detached houses" (Ciccione, 1985, p. 3). Social conditions in private sector high-rise developments are little different from those in surrounding neighbourhoods. Households in peripheral urban areas are drawn mainly from lower middle income, blue or white collar families, often at an advanced stage in their life cycle. Patterns of tenure, floor space and other features are close to those typical for the country, although the level of ownership is likely to fall below the national average of over 70%.

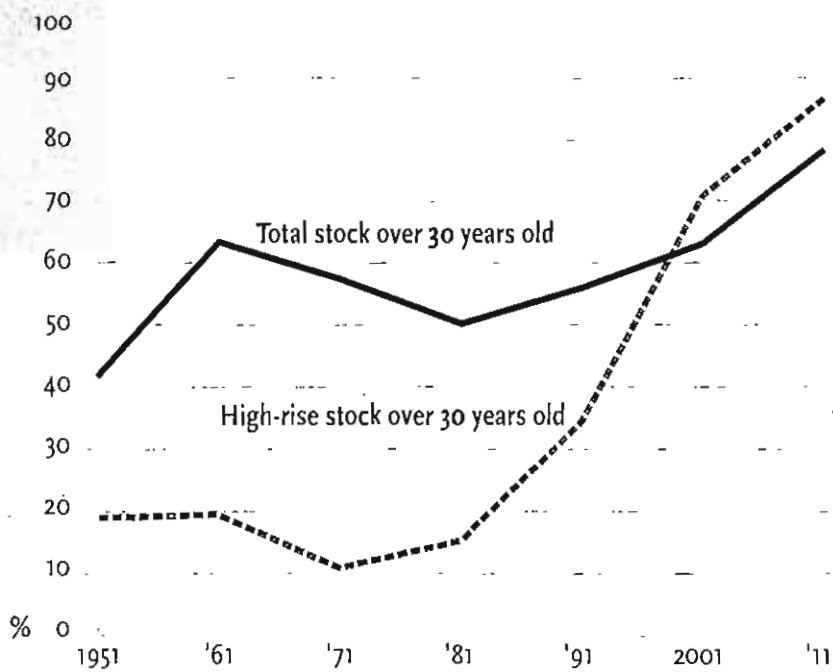


6.5 Problems, measures and the future for high-rise housing in Italy

Concern over the experience of neighbourhoods and communities in cities has emerged only very recently, stimulated by a financial crisis in public housing and a decline in urban quality. The problem of social integration in local communities and the failure of the ideology of the 'neighbourhood' have served to focus political and popular attention on declining high-rise areas (Coppo & Cremaschi, 1994). Serious problems now affect the oldest and poorest social rented estates housing concentrations of families and unemployed residents dependent on a welfare system. A new programme for social housing supports 'integrated' renewal projects intended to create new and socially diverse neighbourhoods, including social rented high-rise estates. Projects have to satisfy such criteria as using both public and private finance; combining refurbishment with new construction and achieving multi-functional uses.

The question must be asked whether Italy has a specific problem with its high-rise housing per se. Such a relationship is not clear. Satisfaction with high-rise living tends to be linked with the quality of maintenance, to the incidence of technical and social problems or to location, rather than to the form itself. For example, in common with any other housing located at the metropolitan periphery, high-rise estates are just as likely to experience such environmental problems as nuisance, pollution, traffic congestion, etc. Only where a

Figure 6.2 Total housing stock and high-rise housing stock in Italy, over 30 years old, 1951-2011



Source: Estimation on Istat (National Institute of Statistics), Cresme, Padovani

range of problems has become concentrated, have 'problem estates' emerged.

The future for high-rise housing estates is intimately bound up with the emerging 'maintenance problem'. Since the Second World War, the proportion of older homes has declined as new construction has increased. The critical age of thirty years before the need for renewal has never affected more than 50% of housing, but this share is now increasing (see Figure 6.2).

Over 50% of high-rise housing now falls within this 30 year category, and over the next ten years, almost all blocks are likely to require major repair. The specialised improvement work required will make major demands on the construction industry in terms of both the type and volume of work required. Until now, renovation has focused mainly on historic dwellings or on small housing schemes, but the techniques required for this work are unlikely to be relevant to the high-rise sector. For the estates themselves, new programmes stress the importance of the quality of the urban environment, the need to improve the overall appearance of estates and to provide working and leisure spaces next to residential buildings.

There is also a growing need for programmes to deal with wider urban issues, in particular the incidence of 'problem areas' and the widespread problem of the urban 'outskirts'. Social sector high-rise estates are disproportionately affected by the concentration and segregation of the under-privileged and socially excluded, and the 'rejuvenation' of such neighbourhoods is likely to be the focus of new policies: "The neighbourhood is the appropriate place to carry out a dynamic and relevant analysis of the difficulties faced by its inhabitants, and within which all the family, community and institutional networks can be mobilised" (Commission of the European Union, 1993, p. 53).

Whilst working within a defined locality may enable a targeted and partnership approach to intervention, it cannot provide all the answers. As in other countries, local efforts to improve the worst social housing areas have had to be supported by national policies. The issue is not only the recovery of an estate's physical environment but also the need to deal with the social and economic circumstances of its inhabitants. New programmes foresee new construction; refurbishment; new commercial premises and the provision of green

Rome's Corviale: 'machine for living in' needs retooling (by Stefano Sampaolo)

Amongst the so-called 'problem estates', architectural innovation will require special attention and treatment. The Corviale social-housing estate is located on the southern periphery of Rome. It was designed by an eminent architect at the beginning of the 1970s and was completed between 1975 and 1982. The most distinctive features of this estate are its architectural form, a 9-storey building; its size, approximately one kilometre in length and its scale, providing thousands of dwellings. One long corridor at the sixth level is intended to act as the internal, commercial 'street' of the complex. The main building was designed for 6,300 households, and was influenced by Le Corbusier's 'unité d'habitation' in Marseillès. The idea behind the building was to integrate dwellings, shops and facilities in a single complex while stressing the border between town and country. The block attempts to reformulate symbolically and literally the limitation of urban expansion and has a deliberately ambiguous role as half bridge and half dam.

The estate has succeeded in achieving one of its ambitions: it offers a townscape which contrasts

dramatically with the surrounding green space and low-density neighbourhoods. However, the original aims have not been achieved. Although all the flats are occupied, public facilities and social services have not been completed and are still lacking. Shops along the internal street were never opened and all are illegally occupied for residential purposes. Even worse, poor construction quality and a lack of maintenance have contributed to the rapid decay of the building and at least most of the 73 lifts need replacing. At the initiative of the estate's residents and less than 20 years since completion, an agenda has been established for its renovation and the local authority and housing agency have prepared a programme for the estate's comprehensive rehabilitation.



The monstrous 1 kilometre long building of Corviale in Rome.

Photo's by: Alessandro Calabrò

and open spaces etc., but such comprehensive approaches may still be unable to deal with complex blocks and estates with 'bad reputations'. For the first time in Italy, demolition has entered the vocabulary of housing policy, and some blocks with special features and problems are now on the verge of such a fate. For example, one of the many buildings in Naples was demolished in 1998, and almost one thousand families rehoused in new low-rise buildings on the same site. Whether or not this is the start of a new trend is yet to be seen.

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