

UAH!

Unconventional
Affordable
Housing!

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ATLAS

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RECOMMENDATIONS

BOOKLET / DESIGN STUDIOS
BOLOGNA

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Booklet / Design studios

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1. The project's framework

The profound socio-demographic transformations that have taken place in Europe over the past decades have led to major changes in household composition and what is typically referred to as the family. As a consequence, the ideal equivalence between “family” and “housing typology”, as promoted by the Modern Movement, collapsed highlighting the increasing distance existing between housing demand and housing supply. The above-mentioned transformations have resulted mainly in an increase in the number of households of single people, divorced couples with children, single parents and the elderly, as well as in the spread of the phenomenon of cohabitation among different population groups in search of affordable housing solutions. At the same time, changes in the labour market, namely a significant rise in temporary employment and delocalization, have forced people to organise their lives between more than one dwelling and led to the emergence of new lifestyles, such as couples living apart together in long-distance relationships. In addition, worsening employment and economic conditions have reduced housing affordability, increased precarious and informal housing conditions and set constraints on access to housing, even for middle-income groups and people whose housing demands appear to be increasingly changeable across their life trajectories.

While unconventional* and affordable housing practices can take many shapes and emerge from a diversity of household situations, the lack of an adequate offer by social and public housing policies reflects the inadequacies, dissatisfaction with or inaccessibility of conventional housing offers. A key hypothesis underlying the research is therefore that unconventional solutions can be strategies to cope with such inadequacies and a lack of affordability, better responding to changing or intensifying demands. The intersection between the two levels, affordability and unconventionality, has yet to be explored in-depth and can provide valuable insights for a reflection on existing housing (design).

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1. The project's framework

The Research Project of National Relevance “UAH! Unconventional Affordable Housing” – guided by Politecnico di Milano with Università degli Studi di Trieste, Politecnico di Bari and Università di Bari – aims at identifying and analysing existing affordable and unconventional housing solutions, investigating practices, projects and policies – thus, gaining an understanding of the wide range of housing phenomena considered unconventional and affordable in Europe; analyse these housing solutions and evaluate their qualities, innovative features, shortcomings and criticalities; and at developing architectural design experiments & proposals (in each of the research units' geographical contexts) at the intersection of policy and design, in order to explore the feasibility of innovative solutions within a given context.

*** By “unconventional” we mean above all:**

- the non-equivalence between the idea(s) of family and the type of housing;**
- the presence – among households – of different (social and cultural) profiles and different age populations.**



2. The site: Bologna

Bologna is the seventh most populous city in Italy with about 392,800 inhabitants (just over 1 million including the Metropolitan area). Every day nearly 504,000 people gravitate to the city, not including tourists who, with a growth of about 10% annually, reach 5.8 million. The population is among the longest-living: one in four residents is over 65 years old. The quality of life, services, availability of access to preschools and kindergartens, growth in terms of employment, the international university (which boasts record numbers in world rankings), and its geographic location at the center of the national transportation system make Bologna one of the most desirable medium-size cities in northern Italy.

In the southeastern quadrant within the historical city, near the Viali di Circonvallazione, just a few meters from what remains of the ancient layout of the ancient city walls, is the former Masini Barracks, a garrison of the Ministry of Defense intended for the Special Military Athletes Corps. Located between Via Santo Stefano, Borgolocchi and Orfeo, with entrances from both the last two streets, this complex is created by the amalgamation of several structures over an area of 8,713 sq. m. (and more than 27,000 cubic meters) divided into several buildings facing a large central inner courtyard.

The former Barracks is characterized by a boundary wall made by a number of buildings extending towards South from Via Santo Stefano, where the church-convent of Santi Giuseppe e Teresa dei Carmelitani Scalzi faces. An important evidence whose earliest documented traces date back the church to 1375. The rear of the convent complex overlooks an originally horticultural space, then extensively paved and asphalted in recent times, when used as a barracks courtyard.

The former Barracks has experienced over time various forms of occupation, reappropriation and reuse of space, hosting activities that had the main objective of recognizing the former Barracks as a common good through civic uses that would meet the needs of the inhabitants of the area and the city.

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2. The site: Bologna

After a long phase of negotiation The Municipality of Bologna entered into an agreement with Cassa Deposito Prestiti, the owner of the area, in July 2023: the agreement sanctioned the transfer of a portion of the former Masini Barracks to the Administration on a free loan for use, with the aim of opening a temporary use program to enhance various experimental forms of public utility by making the former Masini Barracks open for use by citizens and associative realities. The agreement falls within the framework of the Bologna Municipality's regulations on temporary uses of decommissioned properties, or those in the process of being so, which promotes these actions as a foundational step in the process of urban regeneration, environmental recovery and social innovation. The area is of great interest because of its location and Plan destination (one of the few still buildable in the historic center, and part of a larger program to reuse disused Bologna barracks), nestled between listed buildings (Church of the Madonna del Baraccano, Church of Santi Giuseppe e Teresa dei Carmelitani Scalzi, and Church of San Giuliano), monuments (Baraccano Complex Portico, theater, meeting and exhibition halls of the Santo Stefano Civic Center, monumental "Voltone", and namesake public gardens) and proximity to Giardini Margherita, the main urban public green space in the city.



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2. The site: Bologna



2. The site: Bologna

Masini Barracks



2. The site: Bologna

Masini Barracks



3. Stakeholders' perspectives

A key part of the UAH! project is the consultation of and cooperation with local stakeholders in order to be able to develop proposals that align with concrete needs and are firmly rooted in the local context.

Real topics and questions concerning the area are summarised as follows:

Housing as an Urgency Issue

In recent decades, the former Masini Barracks complex has undergone a series of transformations of use that, starting with the cessation of its function as a military garrison, have seen several episodes of occupation by self-managed associations, such as the Làbas Social Center. It is precisely the latter that has introduced a series of unconventional use functions of the former military spaces: dormitory for unemployed youth, temporary housing for the homeless, recreational center, place for training and job placement for undocumented immigrants, and Italian language learning center for foreigners. Parallel to these initiatives, numerous musical and artistic events have been promoted for self-financing purposes. Despite the bitter opposition of the more conservative opposition local parties and some residents' committees, on the whole Làbas has always managed to gain a certain consensus among the citizens and had become an important reference point for the most needy, intercepting not insignificant instances in the city that boasts a high number of university students (many of whom are in economic difficulty due to the exorbitant price of rents), and a growing number of immigrants including foreigners and homeless people.

The other major issue is the aging of the resident population, resulting in reduced local revenues and foreseeable repercussions in the economic, social and health spheres.

In this context, the demand for housing has become one of the major fragilities of the capital city of Emilia, affected by a growing phenomenon of short-rental and touristification, which heavily affect the delicate balance of rents, especially low-cost ones.

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Housing as an Affordability Issue

For the aforementioned reasons, rental costs have risen disproportionately in relation to the purchasing power of Bolognese families, especially those with low to middle incomes. The demand for Social Housing is growing, as is that for “alternative” forms of housing, that is, capable of responding to temporary or informal housing needs, both among young people and particularly students (often unable to access private student halls of residence and dorms because they are too expensive), professionals and or families. A further aspect – still largely overlooked – is the birth of the Cineca-Tecnnopole, where the Leonardo supercomputer will be based, and that will soon attract thousands of skilled technicians and researchers from all parts of Europe, exponentially increasing the demand for temporary housing. In this sense, the requests made by Cassa Deposito Prestiti for the former Masini area seem to be going in the right direction, providing (among others) different uses such as individual (permanent and temporary) and collective housing, and reception in accommodation and hotel facilities.

The Relationship between Public and Private

Involving citizens and associations, the Municipality of Bologna defined temporary uses to be activated in the outdoor areas of the Ex Caserma Masini and for the construction of the related management model, in which interested entities were able to participate. At the end of this path, it was planned to transform the square of the former Barracks into a temporary urban nursery to create a pleasant and welcoming place in the heart of the Santo Stefano neighborhood. Specifically, the spaces will be able to be used for cultural, social and recreational events and happenings, exhibitions and temporary set-ups, workshops and educational and training activities, services to people, gardening, urban gardens, consistent with the needs that emerged in the shared planning phase. The loan for use of the former Masini Barracks area, has been extended until December 2025.

**UNCONVENTIONAL
AFFORDABLE
HOUSING** explores the
new possibilities of
contemporary living
at the intersection
of affordability and
unconventionality,
starting from a
reflection on existing
housing projects,
practices and policies.

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