

*Landscapes of Care. Public housing across multiple
geographies: crossing theories and practices*



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Collective Housing by Collective Practice: The Inclined Condominium in Bergamo

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Abstract

In 1972 Bergamo municipality identified new areas within the city's fabric to build public housing developments. In one of these areas a few years later was built a housing project called *Terrazze Fiorite* (Flower Terraces). The intervention was designed by four architects who in those years had co-signed several significant works in the city: W. Barbero, B. Ciagà, G. Gambirasio and G. Zenoni. These architects during the 1960s and 1970s had worked side by side as a *group*. *Terrazze Fiorite* is the result of this kind of collaboration. The housing intervention draws a new portion of the city through a low-rise, high-intensity settlement model with L-shape housing units, arranged around patios. The apparent banality of the intervention, however, conceals an interesting spatial expedient: the settlement pattern is placed on an artificial sloping plane obtained by a continuous and slight staggering of houses arranged one after the other. The slope becomes an opportunity to develop a landscape of uninterrupted pedestrian paths characterized by continuous variations, thanks to excavations that host lush gardens and squares or flat areas near the house entrances. A complex scenery to allow inhabitants a neighborhood sociability in different degrees, where everyone is free to live the space without any kind of barriers. The essay aims to offer, through words and original photographs, a point of view on this housing project highlighting the spatial links established among citizens, buildings, landscape and city.

Keywords: built landscape; low-rise housing; courtyard; collective practice.

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Bergamo adopted its urban development plan in 1969, driven by the post-World War II economic boom that radically transformed the country's urban centers.¹ This plan identified new areas for building expansion in the part of the city known as *Città Bassa* (Lower City); one of the designated areas was the Loreto neighborhood, on the outskirts of the previously built city.² The area is flat and traversed by a major road artery connecting Bergamo to other important urban centers and Switzerland, the Briantea route. Through a detailed plan for subsidized housing, the residential complex known as *Terrazze Fiorite* (Flower Terraces) was built in the mid-1970s. Covering an area of approximately thirty-two hectares, it accommodated around seventeen hundred dwellers with four hundred housing units, 40% of which were designated for social housing, while the rest were on the open market.³

The project was signed by architects Giuseppe Gambirasio (1930) and Giorgio Zenoni (1935) yet attributing the sole authorship of the project to these two individuals is difficult. In fact, for about fifteen years, the two collaborated intensively with two other architects, Walter Barbero (1941) and Baran Ciagà (1934). The four architects, starting from the second half of the 1960s, worked side by side, realizing numerous projects in Bergamo and its surrounding areas, including three schools, a convent, showrooms for furniture and tires, a multifunctional building for housing, parking, and artist atelier. Over the years, the four architects had established a rather unique and consolidated working relationship: each one of them had their own studio next to each other, on the same floor of a building in the center of Bergamo.⁴ The professional offices were separated only by a door, which often remained open to allow to all of them to collaborate informally together on various projects. Although they never formed a single associated studio, their frequent collaboration soon made them known as a *group*.⁵

Their buildings, where different forms and solutions overlap, reveal the distinct inclinations and personal research of the four architects. The natural consequence of this collaborative way of working. However, a common trajectory pursued by the group of designers can be discerned: beyond the forms in which it manifests, architecture is understood as an urban phenomenon⁶ that responds to the surrounding environment, enhances it, transforms it, even with actions in declared contrast, highlighting new relationships between it and the city's inhabitants. The claim of an unified formal research takes a back seat, to make room for reflections that translate these

1 Manfredo Tafuri, *Storia dell'architettura italiana 1944-1985* (Torino: Einaudi, 1982), 22-23

2 Andrea Gritti, "Lungo un Piano Inclinato", *ARK*, no. 33 (March 2020): 125

3 Fulvio Irace, "Complesso residenziale Terrazze fiorite", *Architettura in Lombardia dal 1945 ad oggi*. <http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/architetture900/schede/p4010-00297/>

4 The information about the collaboration about the four architects were obtained during an interview with Giorgio Zenoni at his personal archive in Seriate (Bergamo) in January 2022

5 Walter Barbero, Baran Ciagà, Giuseppe Gambirasio, Giorgio Zenoni, "Eclettismo di gruppo. Architetture di Gambirasio – Zenoni – Barbero – Ciagà", *Casabella*, no. 361, (November 1972): 28-49

6 Paolo Vitali, "Architettura di gruppo: il coraggio delle cose nuove", *Lasciare tracce. Il viaggio di Walter Barbero*, ed. M. Cantamessa (Bergamo: Lubrina Editore, 2015): 28

intentions into shapes – always different. It happens that one of their multifunctional buildings in the center of the city of Bergamo is a collection of volumes arranged to create elevated horizontal connections, linking the building and the city;⁷ or one of their showrooms is a collection of volumes arranged to create a covered promenade, an extension of the surrounding geography.⁸

This attitude towards the project as an urban device finds a clear expression in the Terrazze Fiorite complex. It is an intervention that utilizes the typology of the courtyard house as the foundational nucleus of the entire project. The predominantly single- or two-story apartments, in an L-shaped form, are arranged in pairs of two, forming a C around a south-facing courtyard. The low-density typology of the courtyard house continues the debate of those years on residential settlements. The architects take inspiration from the vernacular example of the *casbah*⁹ which was studied during those years by Team X and became a key area of research in low-rise, high-density housing interventions carried out in the post-war period. This is demonstrated by examples such as the Unità Abitativa Orizzontale in Rome and the PREVI experiment in Lima. They adapt this settlement model with a structural system and a formal ensemble of pitched roofs, bricks – typical of Lombard architecture¹⁰ – and glass panes oriented towards green courtyards. In this way, they achieve an intervention at a community scale, where the courtyard serves as a catalyst for social exchanges among the different residents. A radical response to the surrounding residential fabric consisting of single-family villas and apartment buildings. In addition to the chosen typology, the intervention has another characteristic element. The houses are situated on an artificial sloping plane made of reinforced concrete with a north-south orientation. The inclined plane has a dual effect on the urban scale of the intervention. On one hand, the void created beneath it allows for the accommodation of storage and parking at a level with the streets to the north and south of the plot, connecting the housing to the rest of the city at ground level. On the other hand, the inclined plane, by raising an otherwise flat topography, creates a sequence of stepped houses towards the north, establishing an explicit visual relationship with the hills of the *Città Alta* (Upper City) behind them. The topographic plane transforms the courtyard houses into an inclined condominium, a dual spatial and allegorical hinge, establishing urban continuity and a formal allusion to the upper city.¹¹

Entering the internal circulation streets of *Terrazze Fiorite*, another effect produced by the sloping plane is noticeable: by concentrating vehicular traffic below the plane, the architects were free to arrange pedestrian streets at a higher level. These pedestrian streets overlap with an orientation along the north-south and east-west axes of the private house courtyards.

7 Fulvio Irace, "Edificio polifunzionale Duse", *Architettura in Lombardia dal 1945 ad oggi*. <https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/architetture/900/schede/p4010-00295/?offset=2&q=>

8 Giuseppe Gambirasio, "Seguendo il filo di Arianna", *Gambirasio*, ed. E. Pinna (Genova: SAGEP, 1987): 20

9 Gambirasio, "Seguendo il filo di Arianna", 28

10 Fulvio Irace, "Architetti e architetture a Bergamo nell'epoca della modernità", Bergamo e il suo territorio ed. G. Rumi, G. Mezzanotte, A. Cova (Milano: Cariplo, 1997): 245–263

11 Gambirasio, "Seguendo il filo di Arianna", 28

The intersection generates walkways with sections that narrow and widen repeatedly, terraces that connect the interior of the complex with the hills of the upper city, flat portions to facilitate stopping and access to the housing units. In addition to this scenario, another level of spatial and sensory complexity is achieved through the arrangement of large granite tanks hosting lush shrubs while also serving as seating, making walks along the gently sloping paths enjoyable. The complex weave of visual landmarks and thresholds of bricks and sloping roofs then converges into the fundamental spatial element of the intervention: the entrance courtyards, which with their green landscape provide an intimate and peaceful image to the residents.

Indeed, it is the inhabitants of these houses who live in and bring life to this built landscape. They take care of the green courtyards, furnish the pathways with their everyday objects, with potted plants, with chairs in front of the house doors. They organize events, dinners on summer evenings with large tables invading the walkways while children play along the sloping ramps. In this context, the architecture of the houses in the inclined condominium assumes a secondary role, becoming a theatrical backdrop, a blank drawing board, ready to receive the ideas, care, and all informal collaborative gestures of its inhabitants.

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Captions

[Fig. 1]

Lower entrance to Terrazze Fiorite. Relationship between the housing and Città Alta

[Fig. 2]

Inclined slope connected to the ground with a system of ramps and reinforced concrete columns

[Fig. 3 – Fig. 4]

Interior pedestrian paths

[Fig. 5]

Entrance door with informal green

[Fig. 6]

Houses ensemble placed on the inclined slope















