



# LA CASA

ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS  
MODOS DE HABITAR

**ABADA EDITORES**

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## ESPACIOS DOMÉSTICOS MODOS DE HABITAR

II CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL CULTURA Y CIUDAD  
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<b>Presentación</b> .....	XIX
Juan Calatrava	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 1

**Arquitecturas de la casa: el espacio doméstico  
a través de la historia**

<b>Lo público y lo privado en la forma urbis de Santiago 1910. El espacio doméstico en el Canon Republicano</b> .....	22
Josep Parcerisa Bundó, José Rosas Vera	
<b>La Alhambra habitada. Experiencias del paisaje desde el espacio arquitectónico..</b>	37
Marta Rodríguez Iturriaga	
<b>Housing and Children: Architectural Models from the Modern Movement</b> .....	48
Alexandra Alegre	
<b>Högná Sigurðardóttir. La misteriosa marca indeleble del origen</b> .....	59
Julio Barreno Gutiérrez	
<b>Las casillas de peones camineros y su implantación en la costa del sudeste de España</b> .....	73
Antonio Burgos Núñez, Juan Carlos Olmo García, Francisco José García Castillo	
<b>El <i>palazzo all'italiana</i>, de la casa del príncipe al principio urbano</b> .....	82
Michele Giovanni Caja, Maria Pompeiana Iarossi	
<b>The City and the House: Going Back to the Future</b> .....	95
Antonio Alberto Clemente	
<b>Traditional Urban Housing at Alentejo's "Marble Area"</b> .....	104
Ana Costa Rosado	
<b>La consolidación del cuarto de baño en las viviendas de la ciudad de São Paulo, Brasil</b> .....	117
Clarissa de Almeida Paulillo, Tatiana Sakurai	
<b>La cama <i>amueblada</i>: del objeto a la estancia</b> .....	126
María de Miguel Pastor, Carla Sentieri Omarrementería	

<b>The Spaces, the People and the Ways of Being at Home in the North of Portugal in the 19th Century</b> .....	136
Alexandra Esteves	
<b>Casa de John Soane en Londres (1792-1827). Luz, iluminación y patrimonio</b> .....	143
Rosalía Fenutría Aumesquet, José Joaquín Parra Bañón	
<b>Rita Fernández Queimadelos. Los proyectos de viviendas realizados en la DGRD (1943-1946)</b> .....	154
Paula M. Fernández-Gago Longueira, Eduardo A. Caridad Yáñez	
<b>Arqueología urbana en Barcelona: aproximación a los espacios domésticos entre los siglos IV-VI</b> .....	167
Francesc Xavier Florensa Puchol	
<b>Memoria e identidad: el espacio de almacenaje en el imaginario doméstico</b> .....	178
Marta García Carbonero	
<b>Between Doorkeeper Apartments and Housemaid Rooms: Ways of Living in a Changing Lisbon</b> .....	188
María Assunção Gato, Filipa Ramalhete	
<b>La casa popular de zaguán, patio y corral. Habitabilidad y protección para el siglo XXI</b> .....	196
Vidal Gómez Martínez, Blanca del Espino Hidalgo, María Teresa Pérez Cano	
<b>Casa en transformación: cocina y tecnología en el siglo XX en Cuenca (Ecuador)</b> .....	206
María Augusta Hermida, María José Cañar, Guillermo Mauricio Torres	
<b>Granada: la arquitectura doméstica de la ciudad cristiana</b> .....	218
Carlos Jerez Mir	
<b>Consideraciones históricas sobre la casa tradicional gallega y otras construcciones adjetivas</b> .....	230
Francisco Xabier Louzao Martínez	
<b>Modern, Rationalist and Mediterranean: Residential Architecture during the Italian Colonization in Libya</b> .....	236
Andrea Maglio	
<b>El confort en la vivienda canaria: de la arquitectura tradicional a los EECN</b> .....	250
Eduardo Martín del Toro	
<b>Instalaciones de la casa: el espacio doméstico en el siglo XX en España a través de la tecnología</b> .....	261
César Martín-Gómez, José Manuel Pozo Municio	
<b>El diedro casa   ciudad en la arquitectura nobiliaria de Sevilla: la plaza del Duque</b> .....	272
Pedro Mena Vega	
<b>Un primer acercamiento a la <i>Quinta Nova da Assunção</i> en Sintra</b> .....	282
Iván Moure Pazos	

<b>The Construction of “Minho’s” Domestic Space in Portugal’s 18th Century.....</b>	294
Flávia Oliveira	
<b>Arquitectura moderna en la ciudad histórica. Adalberto Libera y la casa Nicoletti (Roma 1932).....</b>	302
Carlos Plaza	
<b>Casa Bellia en Turín: nuevos espacios para la burguesía.....</b>	315
Alice Pozzati	
<b>Live-Work Architecture. Learning from Peripheral Neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro.....</b>	327
Ana Slade	
<b>The Relationship Between Inhabitants and Vegetation in the Houses of Maceió in the 19th.....</b>	339
Tharcila Maria Soares Leão, Josemary Omena Passos Ferrare, Veronica Robalinho Cavalcanti	
<b>The Home and the World: Domestic Dynamics of the Postwar American Suburban House.....</b>	350
Luísa Sol	
<b>El hogar de Telva. Miradas femeninas al interior doméstico español 1963-1975.....</b>	360
Jorge Tárrago Mingo, Cristina Sunga Zamora	
<b>La casa jesuita en Granada: el Colegio de San Pablo.....</b>	371
María del Carmen Vílchez Lara, Jorge Gabriel Molinero Sánchez	
<b>La habitación en la arquitectura agraria granadina.....</b>	381
Eduardo Zurita Povedano	

## BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 2

### **El proyecto doméstico como núcleo de la modernidad: casa singular y vivienda colectiva, del Movimiento Moderno al siglo XXI**

<b>Habitar el arte: la casa del coleccionista como modelo experimental de espacio doméstico.....</b>	394
Ángeles Layuno	
<b>Domesticidad Mediterránea vs. Modernidad americana de Posguerra. Sert y Rudofsky.....</b>	411
Mar Loren-Méndez	
<b>Tradiciones en las políticas de vivienda pública.....</b>	422
Josep Maria Montaner Martorell	



<b>De la Weissenhoff a Oporto, un camino de servicio</b> .....	430
José Manuel Pozo Municio	
<b>Le Corbusier's <i>Immeuble-villas</i> and an After Lunch Remembrance</b> .....	441
Marta Sequeira	
<b>Le Corbusier. <i>Une science de logis</i></b> .....	454
Jorge Torres Cueco	
<b>La casa productiva. Propuestas para la autosuficiencia alimentaria durante la República de Weimar</b> .....	470
David Arredondo Garrido	
<b><i>Modernità y mediterraneità: sincretismo habitacional de Luigi Figini y Gino Pollini</i></b> .....	482
Emilio Cachorro Fernández, Cristina Medina Valverde	
<b>El <i>piano Fanfani</i> en Roma: la torre de viviendas y la casa patio</b> .....	496
Ana del Cid Mendoza	
<b>Feet on the Sand: Living Spaces in Apartment Buildings by the Sea in Maceió, Brazil</b> .....	510
Camila Antunes de Carvalho Casado, Maria Angélica da Silva	
<b>Atomic-age Housing. The Fallout Shelter in Cold War America</b> .....	521
Chiara Baglione	
<b>De la manzana a la supermanzana. Recuperación e innovación en la cultura urbanística</b> .....	531
Raimundo Bambó Naya, Javier Monclús Fraga	
<b>La ventana y el balcón sobre avenida Providencia (1931/1981): evolución y permanencia de la arquitectura doméstica</b> .....	544
Pedro Bannen Lanata	
<b>Towards the Modern Block: Evolution of an Urban Type in Kay Fisker's Prewar Architecture</b> .....	554
Guia Baratelli	
<b>La casa en Isle of Wight (1955-1956) de James Gowan, austeridad en la modernidad británica</b> .....	566
Alicia Cantabella Gallego	
<b><i>Villeggiatura</i> urbana: una residencia secundaria en el núcleo urbano de São Paulo</b> .....	576
Sara Caon	
<b>Otredades en la habitabilidad de un Monterrey moderno: primeros edificios de departamentos como alternativa a la vivienda unifamiliar</b> .....	586
María de los Ángeles Castillo Soriano, Alberto Canavati Espinosa	
<b>Brutalismo doméstico. Un espacio para la contemplación</b> .....	597
Rubens Cortés Cano	

<b>La Casa Barata dos Santos como experimento, por Nuno Portas y Nuno Teotónio (1958-1962)</b> .....	608
Mª Ángeles Domínguez Durán	
<b>Exploraciones cartográficas comparadas de paisajes residenciales: polígonos vs periferias ordinarias</b> .....	620
Isabel Ezquerro, Carmen Díez-Medina	
<b>The House as Experiment: House in Sesimbra (1960-64) by Portas and Teotónio Pereira</b> .....	634
Hugo L. Farias	
<b>La piedra en la casa moderna</b> .....	645
María Ana Ferré Aydos	
<b>Las casas unifamiliares no construidas del programa <i>Case Study Houses</i></b> .....	657
Pauline Fonini Felin	
<b>Modern Housing and Duplex Apartments: Study of Discourses and Practices of a Typology</b> .....	670
Sabrina Fontenele	
<b>Polígonos de vivienda. Relevancia del diagnóstico en la regeneración urbana de espacios libres</b> .....	681
Sergio García-Pérez, Javier Monclús, Carmen Díez Medina	
<b>A City of Order: on Piccinato's Ataköy</b> .....	692
Esen Gökçe Özdamar	
<b>Paisaje y ciudad en las viviendas de la Universidad Laboral de Almería</b> .....	702
José Ramón González González	
<b>La imagen de arquitectura en la construcción del subconsciente colectivo</b> .....	713
Carlos Gor Gómez	
<b>Prácticas Concretas</b> .....	725
Pablo Jesús Gutiérrez Calderón	
<b>Tropical and Colonial: Single Houses as a Modern Lab in Angola and Mozambique (1950-1970)</b> .....	737
Ana Magalhães	
<b>Casa y Monumento: Roma habitada</b> .....	748
Sergio Martín Blas, Milena Farina	
<b>Las viviendas para empleados realizadas por las grandes empresas en la España de la posguerra</b> .....	760
Miriam Martín Díaz, Enrique Castaño Perea	
<b>Lecciones de Louis Kahn: la sala y la casa en Rogelio Salmons y Livio Vacchini</b> ...	771
Clara E. Mejía Vallejo, Ricardo Merí de la Maza	

<b>Interior Biopolitics—Domesticity as Mass Media in the Making of Swedish Social Democracy</b> .....	783
Carlota Mir	
<b>El arte de lo doméstico. Las casas de Alison y Peter Smithson</b> .....	795
Carmen Moreno Álvarez, Juan Domingo Santos	
<b>La vivienda colectiva como reactivador de hechos de vida urbana</b> .....	806
Sebastián Navarrete Michelini	
<b>The Façade as an Interface in the Housing Architecture of Rio de Janeiro: Design Repertoire</b> .....	819
Mara Oliveira Eskinazi, Pedro Engel Penter	
<b>Manuel Gomes da Costa. La casa algarvia del arquitecto</b> .....	831
José Joaquín Parra Bañón	
<b>A Wealth of Typological Solutions from the Twenties: Vienna and Frankfurt</b> .....	842
Alessandro Porotto	
<b>Un pueblo entre los muros de un cortijo</b> .....	856
Ana Isabel Rodríguez Aguilera	
<b>This House Is Not a Home</b> .....	872
Ugo Rossi	
<b>Los dibujos de Rafael Leoz sobre vivienda social</b> .....	883
Jose Antonio Ruiz Suaña, Jesús López Díaz	
<b>La calle sube al edificio. Vivienda en galería en Madrid, 1949-1956</b> .....	897
María del Pilar Salazar Lozano	
<b>Casas como células. La metáfora biológica y los nuevos hábitats plásticos, 1955-73</b> .....	908
Massimiliano Savorra	
<b>El hogar que envejece</b> .....	918
Marta Silveira Peixoto	
<b>Repetition and Geometry: The House of the Painter Zigaina Designed by Giancarlo De Carlo</b> .....	928
Luisa Smeragliuolo Perrotta	
<b>Plinio Marconi's Public Housing Projects between Innovation and Historical Continuity</b> .....	938
Simona Talenti, Annarita Teodosio	
<b>Casas patio y bloques: las formas de la vivienda para la ciudad moderna, Arica 1953-73</b> .....	949
Horacio Enrique Torrent Schneider	

<b>Doméstico y prefabricado: vivienda unifamiliar en Collado Mediano de Alejandro de la Sota</b> .....	961
Miguel Varela de Ugarte	
<b>Modern Living: Particularities in Rio de Janeiro</b> .....	971
Denise Vianna Nunes	
<b>Equipando la casa moderna. España, 1927-1936</b> .....	982
María Villanueva Fernández, Héctor García-Diego Villarías	

### BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 3

## La vivienda contemporánea desde el punto de vista patrimonial

<b>Un carmen en el barrio del Realejo de Granada</b> .....	997
Ricardo Hernández Soriano	
<b>T y Block House, dos viviendas en Nueva York</b> .....	1007
Antonio Álvarez Gil	
<b>Experimentos de casas en el paisaje. Lo cotidiano y lo sublime</b> .....	1020
Rafael de Lacour	
<b>Cooperativas vecinales para la recuperación patrimonial de barriadas. Sixto (Málaga)</b> .....	1031
Alberto E. García-Moreno, María José Márquez-Ballesteros, Manuel García-López	
<b>Domesticidades del proyecto social del Régimen a través de los poblados de Bárcena (León)</b> .....	1043
Jorge Magaz Molina	
<b>La casa como memoria viva: injertos domésticos en ruinas vernáculas</b> .....	1055
David Ordóñez Castañón, Jesús de los Ojos Moral	
<b>PAX – Patios de la Axerquía. Rehabilitación urbana y de casas-patio con procesos cooperativos</b> .....	1068
Gaia Redaelli	
<b>La casa contemporánea en el cine: estrategia de difusión y promoción del patrimonio cultural</b> .....	1080
Iván Rincón Borrego, Eusebio Alonso García	
<b>Rehabitar después de Habitar</b> .....	1092
Conceição Trigueiros, Mario Saleiro Filho	

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 4  
**La casa: mitos, arquetipos, modos de habitar**

<b>Notas sobre la casa como jardín.....</b>	1104
Xavier Monteys	
<b>Interiores de exteriores. La otra raíz del habitar.....</b>	1116
José Morales Sánchez	
<b>Género y modos de habitar en la Andalucía del siglo XIX.....</b>	1127
Juan Manuel Barrios Rozúa	
<b>La casa veneciana, desde fuera.....</b>	1139
Francisco A. García Pérez	
<b>Muerte de la ciudad y desintegración de lo urbano. La casa como refugio.....</b>	1151
Juan Carlos Reina Fernández	
<b>The Home and Its Transformations in the Daily Life of a Brazilian Social Housing Complex.....</b>	1164
Fernanda Andrade dos Santos, Eda Maria Góes	
<b>El jardín secreto de Luis Barragán.....</b>	1177
Paloma Baquero Masats, Juan Antonio Serrano García	
<b>A «Part of Sky and a Part of Sea, Even Alone»: Luigi Moretti Villas.....</b>	1189
Gemma Belli	
<b>La cocina como principal motor de cambio en la vivienda moderna y contemporánea.....</b>	1199
Juan Bravo Bravo	
<b>Casa contra arquitectura, Bernard Rudofsky y el “arte de habitar”.....</b>	1212
Alejandro Campos Uribe, Paula Lacomba Montes	
<b>El espacio doméstico en las exposiciones: nuevos conceptos durante la 2ª mitad del s. XX.....</b>	1224
Manuel Carmona García	
<b>La cocina-moderna en la vivienda colectiva española de la primera mitad del siglo XX.....</b>	1236
María Carreiro Otero, Cándido López González	
<b>Espacios de sombra y aire, transiciones en la arquitectura mediterránea.....</b>	1248
Antonio Cayuelas Porras	

<b>Habitar los hospitales: el bienestar más allá del confort</b> .....	1259
Pilar Chías Navarro, Tomás Abad Balboa	
<b>La cocina genérica: del marco físico a la atmósfera esencial</b> .....	1272
José Antonio Costela Mellado, Luis Eduardo Iáñez García	
<b>The House of Silence: The Franciscan Dwellings in the Colonial Convents of the North-East of Brazil</b> .....	1282
Maria Angélica da Silva	
<b>Arquitectura y jardín en la vivienda doméstica española del movimiento moderno</b>	1294
Manuel de Lara Ruiz, Carlos Pesqueira Calvo	
<b>The Italian House vs The American House. Decoration and Life-Style in the 50's...</b>	1309
Elena Dellapiana	
<b>Casas de vidrio – 1950: análisis de cuatro ejemplos coetáneos</b> .....	1321
Ana Esteban Maluenda, Héctor Navarro Martínez	
<b>Microarquitecturas a medida. Experiencia de arquitectura social</b> .....	1330
Antonella Falzetti	
<b>The Made-to-Measure House: From an Ideal Home to a Palace Between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries</b> .....	1341
Maria Teresa Feraboli	
<b>Holiday Houses in Italy in the 1930s</b> .....	1351
Adele Fiadino	
<b>Habitar la materia: apilar Cerdeña. Casa de vacaciones en Arzachena, Marco Zanuso</b> .....	1361
Mario Galiana Liras, Miguel A. Alonso del Val	
<b>1978. La Gran Casa, o sobre el interior en la obra de Enric Miralles</b> .....	1372
Carolina B. García Estévez	
<b>Donde termina la casa y empieza el cielo</b> .....	1384
Ubaldo García Torrente	
<b>Green Housing Dream. From Welfare Equality to Deregulation and Desire: Understeshöjden, 1989</b> .....	1397
Andrea Gimeno Sánchez	
<b>The “Medieval House” of Coimbra: Archeology of Architecture in the Demystification of Archetypes</b> .....	1407
António Ginja	
<b>La casa de luz tenue. A propósito de Alvar Aalto, Luis Barragán y Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas</b> .....	1418
José Miguel Gómez Acosta	

<b>Un análisis de la casa excavada-subterránea basado en la Sintaxis Espacial.....</b>	1428
Antonio J. Gómez-Blanco Pontes	
<b>King's Foundation: House, Power and Modernity in King Manuel I's inventory (1522-25).....</b>	1440
Luís Gonçalves Ferreira	
<b>“Raumplan-dwellings”: domesticidad y espacio en proyectos de Sejima-SANAA..</b>	1449
Aida González Llavona	
<b>La casa moderna en Cereté, una lección patrimonial.....</b>	1461
Massimo Leserrí, Merwan Chaverra Suárez	
<b>When a Big House Opens Its Doors: The São Marcos Hospital in Braga (17th-18thCenturies).....</b>	1471
Maria Marta Lobo de Araújo	
<b>El mito de la casa pompeyana entre los siglos XIX y XX.....</b>	1478
Fabio Mangone, Raffaella Russo Spina	
<b>Tiendas de campaña en Marte.....</b>	1493
Josemaría Manzano-Jurado, Santiago Porras Álvarez, Rafael García Quesada	
<b>La casa patio tradicional de la medina marroquí.....</b>	1506
Miguel Martínez-Monedero, Jaime Vergara-Muñoz	
<b>La forma tectónica de la casa: lo ontológico frente a lo representacional.....</b>	1518
Alejandro Muñoz Miranda	
<b>Habitar el cerro: la casa del arquitecto Bruno Violi en Bogotá.....</b>	1530
Serena Orlandi	
<b>Comida a domicilio.....</b>	1541
Nuria Ortigosa Duarte	
<b>Domestic Topographies: The House of Lino Gaspar, Caxias, 1953-1955.....</b>	1551
Maria Rita Pais	
<b>La ritualidad higiénica como domesticación espacial en el arte contemporáneo....</b>	1563
José Luis Panea Fernández	
<b>The Housing General Histories and Classes in Literature.....</b>	1572
Fabrizio Paone	
<b>“Paraísos” en el armario: homosexualidad y negociación doméstica en la California prebélica.....</b>	1587
José Parra-Martínez, María-Elia Gutiérrez-Mozo, Ana-Covadonga Gilsanz-Díaz	

<b>Profundidad espacial. Abriendo el muro. De la habitación sin nombre al jardín de invierno.....</b>	1599
Marta Pérez Rodríguez	
<b>Rooms. Aldo Rossi and the House in Ghiffa: Symbol, Dust and Desire.....</b>	1609
Michelangelo Pivetta, Vincenzo Moschetti	
<b>La colina habitada: características morfológicas y modos de habitar el campo.....</b>	1620
Luigi Ramazzotti	
<b>El <i>studiolo</i> como teatro de la mente.....</b>	1632
Jaime Ramos Alderete, Ana Isabel Santolaria Castellanos	
<b>Modos de habitar en contexto de montaña: la región oriental del Atlas en Marruecos.....</b>	1641
Miguel Reimão Costa, Desidério Batista	
<b>La casa en Santiago de Chile a fines del siglo XVIII: valores materiales y simbólicos.....</b>	1652
Marisol Richter Scheuch	
<b>Hombres de condición inquieta y despegada: el fascinante espectáculo de la precariedad.....</b>	1660
Carmen Rodríguez Pedret	
<b>Maid Rooms and Laundry Sinks Matter: Modern Houses in a Non-modern Context.....</b>	1671
Silvana Rubino	
<b>Inquietante domesticidad.....</b>	1679
Alberto Rubio Garrido	
<b>Houses for Whom? Between the Habitat and the Inhabiting, on Henri Lefebvre's Quest.....</b>	1688
Teresa V. Sá	
<b>Una casa es una «machine de l'émotion».....</b>	1698
Javier Sáez Gastearena	
<b>Espacio doméstico e higiene. Políticas del habitar en Sevilla entre los siglos XIX y XX.....</b>	1710
Victoriano Sainz Gutiérrez	
<b>La vivienda de los fareros, entre la casa y la máquina.....</b>	1720
Santiago Sánchez Beitía, Fernando Acale Sánchez	
<b>Naturalezas en la intimidad; acerca del jardín en los espacios domésticos contemporáneos.....</b>	1732
Juana Sánchez Gómez, Diego Jiménez López, Isabel Jiménez López	
<b>Cármenes, pequeñas historias domésticas.....</b>	1743
Juan Antonio Sánchez Muñoz, Vincent Morales Garoffolo	



<b>Algunas casas modernas: de la caverna al hogar</b> .....	1755
Rafael Sánchez Sánchez	
<b>Recuerdos de una escalera. Experiencias domésticas desplazadas en la obra de Siza</b> .....	1764
Juan Antonio Serrano García	
<b>¿No habitar es modo de habitar? Siglos de permanencia de mitos y criminalización</b> .....	1778
Sonia María Taddei Ferraz, Evelyn Garcia da Cruz, Paula Andréa Santos da Silva	
<b>Tres modos de habitar la casa popular: cereal, vid y olivar</b> .....	1787
Salvador Ubago Palma	
<b>La expresividad de la racionalidad: La casa estudio para Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo</b> .....	1800
Luis Villarreal Ugarte	
<b>Habitar en Iberoamérica</b> .....	1811
Graciela María Viñuales	

#### BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 5

### Miradas externas: la casa en la pintura, el cine y la literatura

<b>Habitar la aventura: casas de Jules Verne</b> .....	1824
Juan Calatrava Escobar	
<b>Casas vacías, olvidadas y recordadas: arte, literatura y memoria</b> .....	1836
Marta Llorente Díaz	
<b>La villa Arpel: machine à habiter, “donde todo se comunica...” (Mon Oncle, J. Tati, 1958)</b> .....	1850
Antonio Pizza de Nanno	
<b>El relato doméstico desde una estrategia vertical</b> .....	1855
Agustín Gor Gómez	
<b>Fondos de escena en el cine de Ozu</b> .....	1868
Carlos Barberá Pastor	
<b>Habitar tras la Transición: los hogares cinematográficos de P. Almodóvar y A. Gómez</b> .....	1879
Ruth Barranco Raimundo	
<b>Espacios domésticos en transición y la ciudad moderna en Ohayo (1959) de Yasujiro Ozu</b> .....	1888
Bernardita M. Cubillos Muñoz	

<b>La casa Stahl, una vida de ficción</b> .....	1898
Daniel Díez Martínez	
<b>Habitaciones para la escritura: el autor y su espacio de trabajo</b> .....	1909
Tomás García Píriz, F. Javier Castellano Pulido	
<b>Ámbitos privados de la residencia colectiva en el imaginario cinematográfico español</b> .....	1920
Josefina González Cubero, Alba Zarza Arribas	
<b>Los registros de la luz. Vermeer y Hopper</b> .....	1929
Luis Eduardo Jáñez García	
<b>Allí reside el tiempo, mi infancia. La cabaña telúrica de Andréi Tarkovski</b> .....	1940
Alejandro Infantes Pérez, Javier Muñoz Godino	
<b>La casa, la calle y el territorio. Narraciones fotográficas de Guido Guidi</b> .....	1951
Marco Lecis	
<b>Entre la literatura y el cine. La casa de Sokúrov en <i>El segundo círculo</i></b> .....	1961
Pablo López Santana	
<b>Habitar un espacio, contemplar un paisaje: mujer, jardín y arquitectura doméstica en China (desde el siglo X hasta el XVIII)</b> .....	1972
Antonio Mezcu López	
<b>Registro de una mirada, Cape Cod House</b> .....	1981
Jorge Gabriel Molinero Sánchez, María del Carmen Vílchez Lara	
<b>La casa como metáfora del viaje. Fotógrafos y arquitectos en Mallorca</b> .....	1993
María Josep Mulet Gutiérrez, Joan Carles Oliver Torelló, María Sebastián Sebastián	
<b>La mirada indiscreta: la ventana en el cine como generador de emociones</b> .....	2004
Patricia Pozo Alemán	
<b>El telar es el cuerpo, el cuerpo es la casa</b> .....	2016
Anita Puig Gómez	
<b>El espacio doméstico en el cine de Jacques Tati: del bloque tradicional a la vivienda sobre ruedas</b> .....	2024
Helia de San Nicolás Juárez	
<b>Fisonomías arquitectónicas. La mediatización de casas de personalidades en Galicia</b> .....	2034
Jesús Ángel Sánchez-García	
<b>Mujeres y jardines en la China clásica: espacios domésticos en <i>Sueño en el Pabellón Rojo</i></b> .....	2046
Beatriz Valverde Vázquez	
<b>Notas autobiográficas de los autores</b> .....	2054

# Los barrios de viviendas públicas de Plinio Marconi entre innovación y continuidad histórica

## *Plinio Marconi's Public Housing Projects between Innovation and Historical Continuity*

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### Resumen

Plinio Marconi (1873-1974), arquitecto-ingeniero de origen veronés, diseñador, teórico y académico, alumno y luego colaborador de Gustavo Giovannoni, es uno de los protagonistas de la escena arquitectónica romana de la primera mitad del siglo XX. Dibuja los planos urbanos de muchas ciudades italianas (Verona, Vicenza, Bologna, Rimini, Salerno, Trento), diseña aldeas rurales en Lucania y Molise y barrios de viviendas públicas (Bologna, Forlì, Pisa, Roma, Salerno). La investigación propuesta tiene como objetivo investigar el papel del Marconi arquitecto, a menudo oscurecido por el del urbanista. La atención se centrará en los proyectos de viviendas públicas, que constituyen para el diseñador veronés un laboratorio de experimentación para la búsqueda de un nuevo lenguaje arquitectónico moderno en continuidad con la tradición nacional.

**Palabras clave:** Plinio Marconi, vivienda pública, Roma, Salerno

**Bloque temático:** El proyecto doméstico como núcleo de la modernidad: casa singular y vivienda colectiva, del Movimiento Moderno al siglo XXI

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### Abstract

*Plinio Marconi (1873-1974), architect-engineer native of Verona, designer, theorist and academic, student and then collaborator of Gustavo Giovannoni, is one of the protagonists of the Roman architectural scene of the first half of the 20th Century. He draws up the masterplans of many Italian cities (Verona, Vicenza, Bologna, Rimini, Salerno, Trento), designs rural villages in Lucania and Molise and many public housing project (Bologna, Forlì, Pisa, Rome, Salerno). The proposed study aims to investigate the role of Marconi architect, often obscured by that of the urban planner. The focus will be on public housing projects, which constitute for the Veronese designer a testing laboratory for the research of a new modern architectural language in continuity with the national tradition.*

**Keywords:** *Plinio Marconi, housing project, Roma, Salerno*

**Topic:** *The domestic project as the heart of modernity: the single, one-off house and collective housing, from the Modern Movement to the 21st century*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Plinio Marconi (1873-1974), architect-engineer native of Verona, designer, theorist and academic, student and then collaborator of Gustavo Giovannoni, is one of the protagonists of the Roman architectural scene of the first half of the 20th Century.

In his long and rich career, Marconi puts into practice his idea of an “integral architect” working in various fields. He draws up the masterplans of many Italian cities, about 40, (including Verona, Vicenza, Bologna, Rimini, Salerno, Trento, Brindisi, Prato) and designs rural villages in Lucania and Molise. But he also builds works of architecture at various scales (interiors of houses and shops, private and public residences) in Italy and abroad (in the Italian colonies in Africa).

Marconi implements many public housing projects in various Italian cities (Verona, Bologna, Forlì, Pisa, Rome, Salerno, etc ...). These projects, mostly developed within the INA-casa Plan (1949-63), constitute for him a testing laboratory for the research of a new modern architectural language in continuity with the national tradition.

### 1. The first experience in Rome: the Garbatella garden-city

Designer and coordinator of several projects on behalf of the Istituto Case Popolari starting from 1919, Plinio Marconi actively participates in the construction of the garden-city of Garbatella, both with complex interventions on a neighborhood scale, and with the design of some residential buildings. The typologies used by the architect-engineer are extremely variable, going from the detached house to the terraced house, from the court house to the closed and compact block. The medieval repertoire of the Lazio countryside echoes not only in the language but also in the plastic articulation of the wall volumes of some artefacts, in particular in the semi-intensive building of Lot VIII created by Marconi between 1923 and 1926. The loggias, the arches that allow access to the internal courtyard connecting the various building blocks, as well as the projecting volumes, clearly recall the achievements found in the territory of Tuscia. The scenographic wings and the perspective views observed in Vitorchiano find instead a happy re-reading at Garbatella not only in the different unpublished urban situations within which we lose, but also more specifically in the experimental Lot XXIV (1929) in which Marconi – responsible for the plan of the block, as well as the head building – arranges the buildings by creating alternations between full and empty spaces, between open and closed views and by organizing a dynamic collective space. The area between the various artefacts and their articulation are carefully studied. For Marconi, the courtyards are a privileged theme of study: «in the extensive housing groups, it is important to arrange the spaces around the lot; they can be divided into portions entrusted to the care of individual tenants, or be placed in the garden and stored in custody to a person in charge of the common administration».<sup>2</sup> Even the «comfortable and adequate»<sup>3</sup> internal provisions refer to the buildings of the Roman countryside, as well as the vaguely fortified appearance, the small windows, the blind surfaces,

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<sup>1</sup> Within this text, the § 1 and 2 are by Simona Talenti; the Introduction and the § 3 are by Annarita Teodosio.

<sup>2</sup> State Archives Office, Rome: Plinio Marconi Archive, Marconi-FAS/ads/03: “Trattazioni diverse nella Enciclopedia Italiana”, item “casa”, in *Enciclopedia Italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti* (Roma: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Giovanni Treccani, 1938), 262-276.

<sup>3</sup> N.D.R. “Casette modello costruite dall’Istituto per le Case Popolari di Roma alla borgata-giardino “Garbatella””, *Architettura e Arti decorative*, n.° 1 (1929-1939): 254-275.

the tower profile or the corner solutions adopted by the engineer in multi-storey buildings of the Lot XI (1926-1927).

The great sensitivity towards the simple, sober, essential volumes, without added decorations, reflects instead the careful study of the caprese tradition. In the external staircases, in the roof terraces, in the lodges of some buildings of the Garbatella, we can find the transition elements between inside and outside (pergolas, large windows and vaulted openings, etc.) that characterize the modest residences of Capri, as pointed out in 1930 Luigi Piccinato observing how the "model house" of Marconi belonging to Lot XXIV had drawn «inspiration from the rustic architecture, enhancing the motif of the external staircase with the addition of the hanging loggia to the parapet and pillars of timber»<sup>4</sup>. But also the arcades that shelter the entrance, the high arches, the original fireplaces, are just some of the elements taken from the language of the "minor" Mediterranean architecture. The use of plaster with traditional colors distinguishes the intervention of Marconi's model house 13 from those of his colleagues who opt for the rationalist white color. But the engineer-architect seems to want to reach modernity while remaining faithful to the local tradition: modern architecture is not in contrast with the national artistic history and can only be the expression of specific needs with respect to which designers must give concrete answers and never abstract or universal. If sometimes vernacular language seems to take the upper hand in order to better construct the urban identity through new and original choices as in the case of the semi-intensive building of Lot VIII, in reality it wants to represent that genuineness and spontaneity that should be the foundation, according to Marconi, of every modern architectural expression. Behind the neo-medieval decoration are actually hiding the articulation of the masses, that composition of the volumes, those contrasts between full and empty, that functional approach that the engineer has discovered during his many trips in southern Italy as well as in the rich Latium territory.



Figure 1: Plinio Marconi's Building, Lot VIII (1930), Garbatella Garden-city, Rome  
Source: S.Talenti (2017)

<sup>4</sup> Luigi Piccinato, "Case popolari. Il nuovo quartiere della Garbatella in Roma dell'Istituto delle Case Popolari di Roma", *Domus*, (feb. 1930): 26.

## 2. Deal with the housing emergency: the case of Salerno after The Second World War

In the same years in which Marconi designed the new General Urban Development Plan of Salerno,<sup>5</sup> the architect-engineer was called upon by the city council to find solutions to the housing shortage caused by the relentless growth in the local population as well as by the destruction of the Second World War and now greatly exacerbated by the damage of the great flood of 1954. About 1700 families were left homeless and were promptly offered assistance by private and public institutions with the result that the eastern part of Salerno was rapidly “reborn”, thanks to a series of timely interventions for the construction of public housing. Anonymous social housing districts characterised by a high population density soon appeared, although there were some examples of residential complexes in which Marconi – who in Salerno worked hand in glove with the architect Scalpelli – was involved that stand out from the rest. In May 1955 they were asked to come up with a more organic solution for a new residential district around the eighteenth century Villa Carrara in Pastena and connected to Highway 18.<sup>6</sup> They were thus entrusted with the task of designing not only the layout of the new settlement, but also suitably standardised individual buildings which had to comply functionally and aesthetically with the urban structure so as to form an organic whole. The residential buildings were all detached and open so as to allow greater and better insolation. While the general plan and the road network layout seem to have been partly complied with, the envisaged use and variety of building types (church, schools, markets, shops, etc.) also differed from those laid out in the designs of the two planners. Built around a new parish church – the Cuore Immacolata di Maria church was actually built, perhaps by Scalpelli himself, on the prescribed site but rotated through 90 degrees – the new district was supposed to accommodate, according to Marconi’s design, a series of facilities such as a cinema, a market and shops, but the wave of building speculation that swept through the expansion area meant that these were not built. Likewise the proposals for isolated high-rise buildings up to 24 m alongside lower buildings of about 14 m were replaced by a widespread intensive building campaign.

A few years later, a similar fate would await the plans drawn up by Marconi and Scalpelli for the new Mariconda district, following the eviction of families from unsafe buildings of San Giovanniello area, as well as from several historic districts (Barbuti and Fornelle). The two designers drew up various solutions in line with the guidelines of the General Urban Development Plan providing for the creation of such public facilities as markets, schools, social centres and numerous green spaces. Marconi and Scalpelli aimed to leave some views open on the hills, as well as offering the buildings a prevalent heliothermal orientation, placing the 4-storey buildings along the perimeter of the area and those of 3 floors in order to form four semi-open cores (similar between their). Unfortunately, the neighbourhood was built according to the 1966 project design with the elderly Scalpelli now flanked by numerous local architects and engineers (Visconti, Marano, etc.) all visibly oiling the machinery of speculation, while only two community buildings – the market and the kindergarten – were constructed following the architectural design prepared by Marconi and the engineer Vittorio Gigliotti. The result is that, today, those two buildings seem completely unrelated to the fabric of social housing in which they are set and which is currently in an evident state of urban blight.

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<sup>5</sup> Simona Talenti and Annarita Teodosio, “Salerno: I piani dall’utopia alla cementificazione. Alfredo Scalpelli e Plinio Marconi: due specialisti in materia”, *Annali di Storia dell’Urbanistica e del Paesaggio*, n. ° 5 (2017): 8-23.

<sup>6</sup> Salerno City Archives: *Deliberazione n.° 1275* (16 may 1955): 38

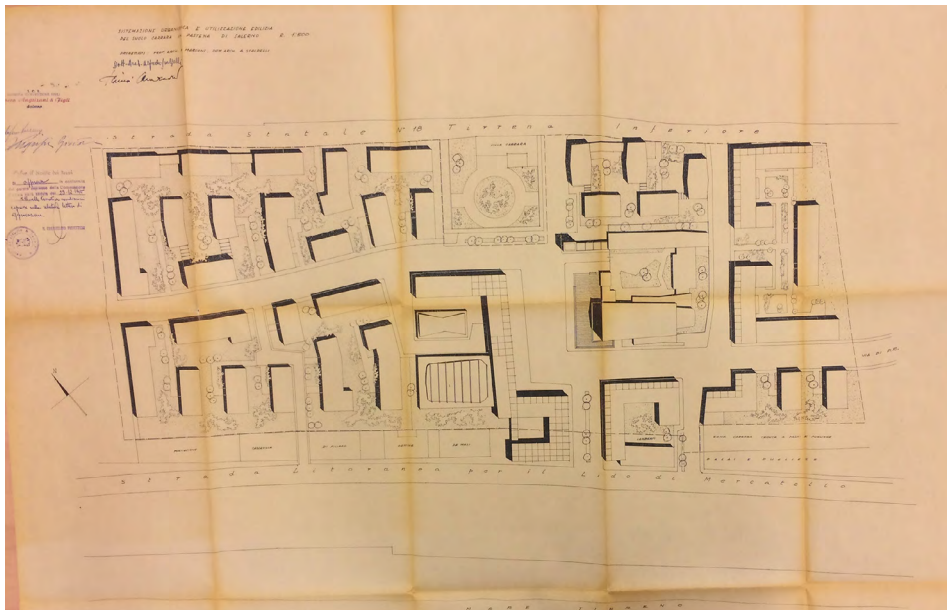


Figure 2: Urban development plan in the Pastena district, 1955, Salerno  
Source: Salerno City Archives: Settore Urbanistica:1962/2

### 2.1. The “De Gasperi” Housing Complex

The only operation that Plinio Marconi managed to carry out according to his plan was the “De Gasperi” Housing Complex, built in the expanding easterly part of the old town of Salerno.<sup>7</sup> The original scheme of the dwelling unit located in “Conforti area” and now known as the “De Gasperi” neighbourhood, is today rather difficult to read and strongly compromised by the transformations that occurred besides the lack of construction of some buildings. Designed for INA Casa, the “De Gasperi Housing Complex” originally called for 206 apartments, numerous shops, a nursery school and a social centre. Marconi obviously adheres to the rules established by the Master Plan of which he is responsible: buildings of no more than 5 floors, at most 15 meters deep and 19 meters high and about 7 meters far from the road axes. As the photographs of the time show, the new settlement, once completed, will be completely isolated and without contact with the urban fabric as it is still essentially immersed in the countryside. Built from 1959 onwards still, the district reflects all the urban characteristics to which Marconi aspired, such as the extensive variety of building types, the presence of large green areas and the intention to establish a relationship with the local landscape. These design options exemplified and translated the painstaking study of the particular features of the historical context from which the future inhabitants of the neighbourhood would come. In fact, the link with the past and the local traditions characterizes the intervention of Marconi: a bond expressed through different measures including the choice of construction materials, the typological variety of buildings and the organization of outdoor spaces. The underlying logic shows a clear preference for the idea of a practically self-sufficient community, where the green spaces and communal areas determine the overall plan for the neighbourhood. The rows of buildings are arranged around a large, south-facing courtyard planted with oranges trees, counterpoised by a second north-facing space occupied by terraced townhouses with private gardens.

<sup>7</sup> The documents are kept in Salerno City Archives and State Archives Office (Rome).



In a barycentric position, a porticated building, with shops on the ground floor, separates the two courtyards, while a single six-storey tower building symbolically closes the southeast quarter. The different typologies find their unity thanks to the urban arrangement on one side and to the simple and essential language on the other. The landscape visuals towards the mountains of the north-east are among the concerns of Marconi, who also indicates them in the design drawings. On the one hand, the new tenants will take advantage of the presence of the Orange Grove, while on the other they have a nice view on the hills behind. From the table of fences and lodgings to green we deduce the commitment of the architects to provide for a wide planting, now largely compromised by the transformation, in the football field of the Great Central Orange Grove.

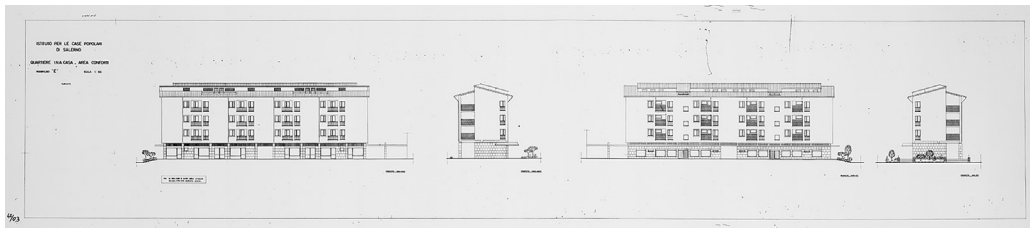


Figure 3: Some residential buildings in the “De Gasperi” Housing Complex, 1959, Salerno  
Source: State Archives Office, Rome: Marconi/PRO/42/03

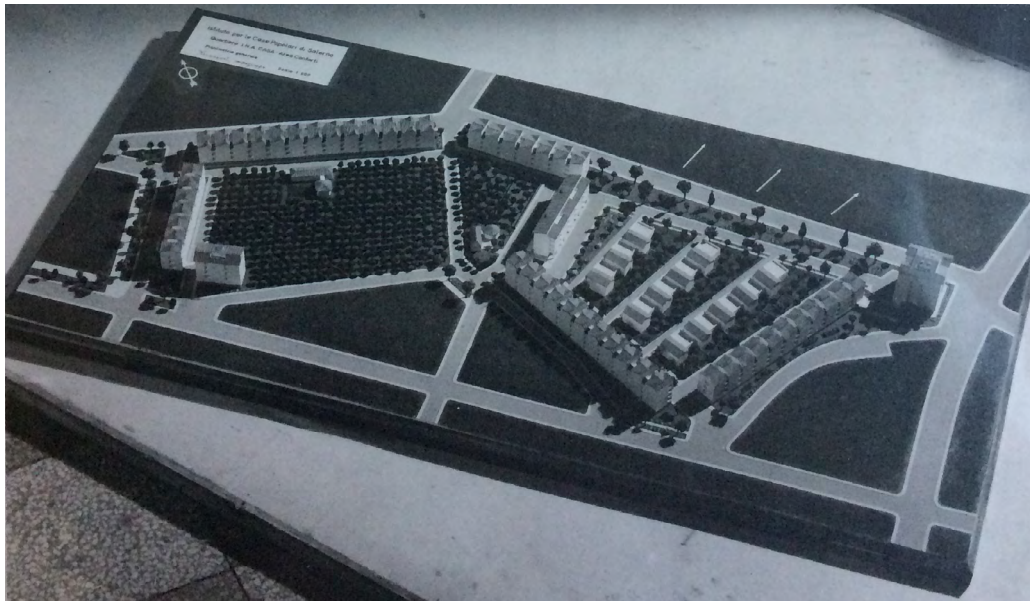


Figure 4: “De Gasperi” Housing Complex, 1959, Salerno  
Source: State Archives Office, Rome: Marconi/FASC. 5



### 3. Marconi and the Housing Complex of the Ina-casa Plan in Rome

On 28 February 1949 the Italian Parliament approved the law n. 43 "Measures to increase the employment of workers, facilitating the construction of houses for workers". This act, known as Fanfani Law, from the name of the then Minister of Labor and Social Security, starts the realization of the INA-casa Plan. It has an initial duration of 7 years, later doubled and extended until 1963. The Plan has both economic and social objectives: increasing employment in the construction sector; improve the living conditions of the lower middle class by realizing economic housing inserted in new self-sufficient urban centers, equipped with services and collective spaces (schools, churches, markets, gardens) that emphasize the community dimension. The Plan makes it possible to regulate the growth of Italian cities after World War II and to influence their physical and social form by opposing the fragmentary and speculative interventions. Moreover, through the many urban planners and architects involved, the Plan is a laboratory of design experimentation and a moment of reflection on individual and collective living, on an architectural, urban and social scale.

The Ina-casa wants to change the post-war construction mindset and create quality public housing, availing of well-known architects. So, he also publishes small manuals - two in the first seven years (1949 and '50) and two in the second (1956) - with suggestions, recommendations and examples for designers, models to be interpreted and reworked adapting them to different situations, not simple rules to be applied.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the first seven-year period (1949-56) even investigations are carried out among the assignees to understand preferences and detect critical issues. The results converge in a manual that represents a sort of balance of previous experiences.<sup>9</sup> Are also identified solutions to be excluded (buildings higher than 3 floors, stairs and balconies uncovered, duplex, accommodation on the ground floor) and others to incentivize (kitchen-dining separated from the living room that does not have to be crossing, protected entrance, built-in closets, internal communicating sinks with drying racks, loggias and balconies in the absence of gardens).

Adhering to these rules implies an increase in living areas and services, and increasingly shortens the distances between the popular house and the bourgeoisie home. On the other hand, the proportioning of services implicitly introduces the concept of urban planning standards. The new districts avoid models of rationalist modernity, characterized by indefinite repetitions, monotonous and abstract compositions, and prefer an extensive town-planning, with low density and large green areas, polycentric schemes, various compositions linked to the places so to seem spontaneous, constituting examples of modernity respectful of Italian and local traditions.

#### 3.1. The "Tuscolano" (1950-60) Housing Complex

In the second post-war period Marconi continues to be very active on the Roman architectural scene. He contributes to the growth of the Capital, often summing up his skills as an urban planner and an architect. He took part in the construction of some of the new residential districts promoted by the Ina-casa Plan, including Tuscolano (1950-60) and Torre Spaccata (1955-63).

<sup>8</sup> Piano di incremento occupazione operaia. *Case per lavoratori, 1. Suggestioni, norme e schemi per la elaborazione e presentazione dei progetti. Bandi di concorsi* (Roma: Piano di incremento occupazione operaia, 1949); Piano di incremento occupazione operaia. *Case per lavoratori, 2. Suggestioni, esempi e norme per la progettazione urbanistica. Progetti tipo* (Roma: Piano di incremento occupazione operaia, 1950).

<sup>9</sup> Piano incremento occupazione operaia. *Case per lavoratori, 3. Guida per l'esame dei progetti delle costruzioni Ina-Casa da realizzare nel secondo settennio* (Roma: Piano di incremento occupazione operaia, 1956).

The Tuscolano, which takes its name from the ancient Via Tuscolana which forms its backbone, was built between 1950 and 1960. It is the largest Ina-casa roman district, consisting of 112 buildings of various types (buildings in line, courtyards and towers), 3150 housing for 18,000 inhabitants. It is divided into 3 independent groups: Tuscolano I (1950-56), an office intervention designed by municipal technicians; Tuscolano II (1952-56) which urban planning is coordinated by Mario De Renzi and Saverio Muratori; Tuscolano III (1950-54) consisting of the experimentation of Adalberto Libera in a Horizontal Housing Unit.<sup>10</sup>

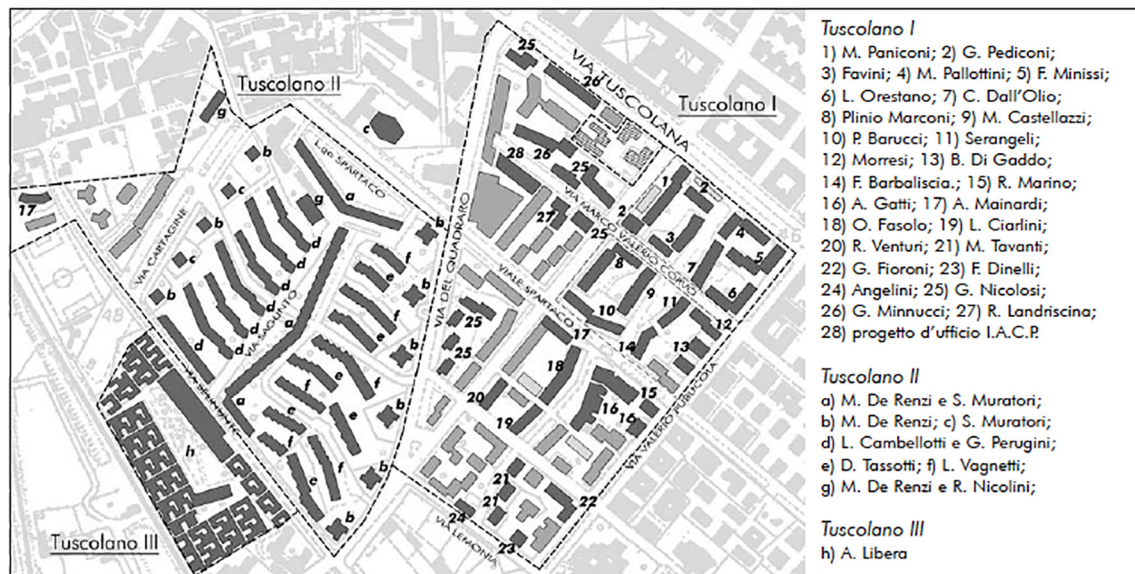


Figure 5: "Tuscolano" Housing Complex (1950-60), Rome

Source: Rinaldo Capomolla, Rosalia Vittorini, eds., *L'architettura di Ina Casa (1949-1963). Aspetti di conservazione e recupero.* (Roma: Gangemi Editore, 2003), 128.

Marconi designs some buildings for Tuscolano 1, a nucleus that is grafted onto the regular plot of rationalist approach traced by the urban planning tool in force at the time, composed of 4-6 storey buildings, with reinforced concrete structure and brick infill, plaster finishes and wooden windows and doors. The residences meet the quality standards required by INA-casa, but the neighborhood in its entirety, unlike the others two sectors (Tuscolano II and III), does not have a unitary design and clearly shows the influences of the numerous designers who contributed to its realization.

In this context, Marconi realizes two linear buildings, placed orthogonally between them, that form a sort of "L" at the intersection of two streets. The biggest one, with the main front on Via Lucio Sestio, has 6 floors above ground and the pitched roof. It consists of 3 slightly staggered parts that determine a jagged composition. The smallest, with main front on Via Marco Valerio Corvo, has 3 floors above ground and is connected to the other one only by the staircase built in adjacency. The two buildings, although different in size and residential type, are homogeneous for structure and finishes. The façades, finished in brown plaster decorated with a small pale stringcourse, are characterized by the presence of brise-soleil connected to service areas and openings of different sizes. The volumetric regularity is interrupted only by semi-recessed loggias rotated about 30° with respect to the façade line. A solution probably inspired by the

<sup>10</sup> Paola Di Biagi, ed., *La grande ricostruzione. Il piano Ina-Casa e l'Italia degli anni '50* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2001), 435.

residential system patented by the architect Herbert W. Tullgren in the United States, mentioned in the entry "house" of the Italian Encyclopedia developed by Marconi in the Thirties.<sup>11</sup> A small strip of green separates the main fronts from the streets, forming a sort of filter from vehicular traffic; on the back, however, there is a wide courtyard paved paths, flowerbeds and tall trees.

### 3.2. The "Torre Spaccata" (1955-63) Housing Complex

More important is the role played by Marconi in the construction of the Ina-casa Torre Spaccata district (1958-62), located in the south-eastern outskirts of Rome, along the Via Casilina. The settlement of 2200 housing for the middle class has an extension of about 31 hectares and is second only to Tuscolano. The project is carried out by about 50 architects, divided into 10 groups, coordinated by Plinio Marconi, also responsible for one of the groups. The general layout of the district recalls that of the Garbatella for the shared reference model, the city-garden, but also for the presence of a large road axis that crosses it. In fact, if generally the main road is located on the edge of the town, in this case, the settlement is cut by Via dei Romanisti, a wide road along which are located the services and equipment of the neighborhood (the market, the school, the social center, the church). This seems to be the result of a precise design choice that expresses the desire to create a relationship between the new district and the historic city, overcoming the concept of self-sufficient, closed and isolated village.<sup>12</sup>

The various cores that make up the district, designed by the individual groups, are well recognizable. Each of them is centered around courtyards defined by houses in line of 3-5 floors and is characterized by the presence of a 7-storey tower building placed in a tangent or central position. The various groups autonomously and quite freely develop the pre-established types, creating different complexes for geometries, materials and finishes. The result, however, is a varied but unitary whole, played on the alternation of full and empty, diversified and often irregular shapes. The whole intervention is characterized by great care for common and green areas. In fact, even today, only 4 of the 15 courts are paved and used for parking; the rest are occupied by gardens with tall trees, safe havens far from noise and vehicular traffic, filter areas where the accesses of the buildings are located and, in some cases, the nursery schools.

As in the previous experience of the Garbatella neighborhood, this time Marconi plays the role of urban planner and general coordinator and of architect too. He designs the large school complex in pavilions and the nucleus located at the southern end of the district, near the market. It is a system consisting of a series of buildings in line and of a tower. The in-line houses, of 3-5 floors, are arranged in a staggered sequence and have a unique volumetric solution that entrusts the suture between the various building bodies to the overlapping loggias. While a continuous crowning with protruding eaves unifies the whole complex. On the adjacent block, in a central position, there is the 7-storey tower, also designed by Marconi. It is a building with a helical plant articulated around the central stairwell forming a compact volume, wisely lightened by the presence of a base that detaches the building from the ground and a pitched roof that, thanks to the continuous cut of the crowning loggia, seems almost suspended.

Also on this occasion, therefore, Marconi proves to master all the project scales and, while respecting the pre-established rules, does not lose the opportunity to experiment with new forms and languages. He contributes to writing an important page in the history of urban planning and

<sup>11</sup> State Archives Office, Rome: Plinio Marconi Archive, Marconi-FAS/ads/03: "Trattazioni...", 262-276.

<sup>12</sup> Paola Di Biagi, ed., *La grande ricostruzione...*, 440.

Italian architecture of the Twentieth century and his figure as a designer, urban planner and theoretician, certainly deserves further study and analysis.



Figure 6: "Torre Spaccata" Housing Complex, Plinio Marconi's sector, Rome  
Source: State Archives Office, Rome: Marconi/FASC. 5



Figure 7: "Torre Spaccata" Housing Complex, Plinio Marconi's Tower, Rome  
Source: State Archives Office, Rome: Marchtponi/FASC. 5

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