

The Right to a Home

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The right to have a home (*la casa per tutti*) is a basic and crucial right in the town. It is clearly recognized in article 25 of the Declaration of 1948, and it assumes that society (the town) accepts that each citizen has his or her own space. Yet it is determined by the right to “have an adequate standard of living” and it is related to another series of social rights (the right to health and welfare, to food and clothes, to medical assistance and the necessary social services, etc.). To the question of what constitutes an adequate standard of living is (and, consequently, what the adequate “standard of home” is) there is no single answer. As we know, it is something contingent, historical and cultural, something which depends on both the characteristics of the home in question and the nearby urban environment, and whose parameters (of surface, construction and comfort) are of necessity related to what the evolution of the standard of living in a certain town establishes at each moment. Therefore, in order to assess the fulfilment of such a right, each home must be considered in its area and in its time, and attention must especially be given to striking a balance between its services and those of general or average homes of the rest of the town. In other words: the fulfilment of this right assumes avoiding any form of ghetto-formation or segregation inside the residential zone of a town. As the home defines urban quality and it can definitively signal its segregation, or at least some of its main signifiers.

If we take into the planet as a whole the fact that this segregation is what makes the difference comes into sharper relief. The embodiment of rights in the town is always subject to a certain limit when it comes to be applied in practice. This limit is the presence of great number of people in each town who do not enjoy these rights. It would be strange indeed to find a town which does not suffer from segregation: having some areas which are more equal than others. Or in other words: there are always segregations, of one kind or another which have to be corrected. This is something which has been noted above when commenting on safety, welfare, freedom and dignity in the town. This danger was seen immediately: the creation of ghettos, which goes contrary to equality. There is a constant tendency to put this marginal, superfluous and excluded population further and further away. It is an ever-present variable. The story of the towns is rich in segregations of this kind, and of town planning which has always fomented them.

In the final analysis these segregations are related to the increase of income differentials among the inhabitants of the towns, and to the new forms of poverty in the towns. The level of income constitutes the first barrier to segregation. The European Council echoed this situation when in 1994 it expressed its conviction that “entire groups of people are totally or partially outside the field of the effective application of human rights” as a result of poverty. The data are conclusive: one out of six inhabitants on the planet lives in absolute poverty (that is, 1000 million people) and 800 million children are starving.

It is not a “Dickensian” poverty though, but the progressive destruction of the existent relationships between one sector of individuals and the rest of the society. This is poverty. It always presupposes the confrontation between the individual and his incapacity, which implies a sense of isolation or actual isolation of these extremely poor individuals or groups of individuals. There are environments, areas, or whole towns where these situations are concentrated and the sense of helplessness is mutually reinforced, as, in its own way, poverty also pollutes, takes root and grows. What is the that town planning has had and still has against these situations? The problem of having a home is recognized everywhere. It would be a strange country indeed which did not suffer -with greater or lesser intensity- from problems of shortage or of inadequate housing. A variety of policies are applied. In this field too governments are aware of how decisive their intervention is and, as in the case of land, there is a long regulatory tradition which is not always an efficient one. Once again, town halls can have a key role to play with respect to housing policy, and consequently, in the policy tending to eliminate housing segregation.

The residential areas of rich countries built under the protection of post-war housing policies are now facing problems because those areas have become ghettos. Yet segregation is also favoured, of course, by the absence of housing policy. In fact, housing policy has always trusted the processes of filtering-down, which means the building of new homes for those financially better situated and which can then, according to this rational, place the homes left by these individuals on the market, thus benefiting other less privileged sectors. This means, in the long term, the grouping of homes by categories and the rejection of mixing.

The circumstances are totally different in the case of poor countries, where a larger part of the population lacks the means to secure an adequate home. This means, of necessity, a change of focus. Public policies to face this situation are, at best, not very realistic, as people with low incomes, or with

none at all, have no opportunity to obtain land or houses legally. This results in an increase of unregulated settlements, according to a process which encompasses more than 70% of new dwellings in the towns of poor countries (according to recent estimates) which lack administrative authorization.

Given this situation, this history and these experiences, responses in practice are not homogeneous. In poor countries the key issue urges is settling the town deficit (that is, a “town planning for the rich” everywhere). Faced with the impossible generalization of accommodating the masses by a central administration, it is necessary to insist on situations which already had their echo in past generations, like J. F. Turner’s position defending the idea that the population accommodates itself, whereas the public official makes it much easier for them to have the conditions so that their self-construction is efficient, making it clear what the conditions for the land are, adapting the rules for construction, and making the basic infrastructure provision easier for them.

In rich countries, there are poor dwellings everywhere. In recent years some changes have been observed. As in the case of infrastructures and the crisis of the genuinely American dispersed town model, for some time now the efforts to avoid segregation for reasons of social and economic efficiency have lead the authorities to try solutions tending to result in low-cost dwellings conveniently scattered over the town. One element which usually appears to be determinant is the presence or absence of cheap homes in particular areas.