

NEW DIGITAL INSTRUMENTS FOR THE COMMUNITY BUILDING IN HOUSING COOPERATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The research starts from a study carried out for Confcooperative Habitat, which focused on the systematic analysis of the materials produced for the launch of a new season of the cooperative movement. The goal is to improve the active action on communities for a tangible social impact able to propose a model that knows how to enhance the common urban spaces within the interventions. Finding the new needs and the new processes that characterize living, outlined also in their condominium and urban dimension of 'common good', therefore of 'common housing'. The procedural model proposed and modulated in an evolved platform, seeks to multiply the common practices of living in the city and live in harmony with the built environment, building networks of services with the community.

KEYWORDS

habitat, common housing, housing services, associative rating, community building

The study describes the research path for the definition of management with distributed leadership of the new communities of building cooperatives. The new cultural phase promoted by the National Federation foresees that interventions in the cooperative must be based on the principles of the Common Housing¹ (Maggioni, 2018) and of the Carta dell'Habitat² (Consonni, 2019). Therefore, the focus of the cooperative action moves from 'home' as a good, to 'habitat' as a set of services that define a better quality of life (evolution also recorded in the change of name, from Federabitazione to Confcooperative Habitat). The dwellings must have a series of qualitative flows in the product and in the space and elements that qualify the civil life and the existential dimension of those who live there, rediscovering a 'political function' (Olivetti, 1946). Cooperative developments provide habitat for their residents, become a catalyst for community building through their design and collaborative decision making structure, as well as lessen the impact on the environment through the sharing of resources and reducing the separation and sprawl of the developments overall configuration. Cooperative with affordable units can provide shelter for people with moderate incomes within these affluent communities and at the same time facilitate increased interaction among its residents for a better living quality. In this historical moment we are immersed in a process of change that, in nature and in time, is a revolution, an abrupt break with the past that led to a radical transformation of the system anything but linear: in the transition, we need to experiment with

new solutions and then consolidate and replicate the best ones (Manzini, 2015). Starting point is the observation that the cooperative movement is at a crossroads: it must overcome the operating methods that have led it to lose sight of the mutual aim³ at the base of the companies, but above all it must try to define new procedural modalities (Mastrodonardo, Radogna and Romano, 2018) for a social impact⁴ capable of defining a real change, or an impact that has a transformative power on society and on the reference context (Zamagni, Venturi and Rago, 2015).

The context of the work is the national decreasing ones (metropolitan, provincial e regional): the strong urbanization of the population and the displacement in geographical areas of the north envisage scenarios in which, by 2036, only some cities in the north would result in a positive balance sheet of population, with a double-digit contraction in the rest of Italy, especially in the south (DemoSi Cresme, 2018). Added to this are new demands on housing dictated by a variety of changes in social composition that, combined with the growth of the condition of loneliness and malaise in the urban environment (Harvey, 2012), cannot be separated from a territorial assessment of the housing demand in degree to return a mosaic of variable intensity. They range from the gentrification risk of some historic cities, to the progressive contraction of internal areas, to the need for quality in the peripheral territories, which clash with an increasingly polarized market and with an increasingly evanescent public offer (Maak, 2015).

Despite the cultural difference that characterizes different realities, the study of good practices spread in other countries, for example, the Switzerland cooperatives (Jacomella, 2018), together with the definition of scenarios (possible or desirable) in the implementation of the theory of change (Keystone, 2009), can help define a framework of action for future interventions in a cooperative through: a) the identification of long-term objectives; b) the mapping of beneficiaries, stakeholders and relations in the production of value; c) the identification of the enabling conditions and the requirements necessary to reach the beneficiaries; d) the construction of indicators that measure impacts, to constantly evaluate the progress of the project; e) the construction of a narrative that tells the logical and value steps behind the process, to be defined in terms of mixed modes between virtual and real. The research works on social innovation and must therefore seek a clear vision in order to identify, among the many scenarios that can be verified with more or less probabilities in the future (Dunne and Raby, 2013), the desirable one for the impact to be generated, trying to choose an approach that manages to control, or at least monitor, the developments underway to guide a long-term process (Fig. 1).

Method, tools and articulation of the research – The idea of creating a working method, that can systematically guide the process (or processes) of building a cooperative of inhabitants through a common platform, emerged from the analysis of cultural revival of the cooperative system foundational documents (Fig. 2). To this end, a collaboration was initiated between Push, a design laboratory for urban and social innovation, and the Agenzia dell’Abitare, a consortium of cooperatives based in Abruzzo, to

incorporate the innovations that can generate into the digital platform new processes within the cooperatives. The work followed the study phases:

- Background analysis; the analysis carried out has gone through the scientific study of the state of the art, of the literature on similar themes, in particular on the international cooperative housing movement and on co-housing. In addition, the interviews of the Milan cooperatives, the monitoring of the work that it's being done in Abruzzo, and the study of online platforms that already follow complex processes related to living, to build a realistic background;
- Analysis of the Carta dell'Habitat, the mutual rating and the Common Housing; the study and definition of some specific objectives through the analysis of the text, which today represents the cultural base of Confcooperative Habitat, starts from the city as a polis and reaches the aesthetic of the city and the public space (Fig. 3);
- User Journey; the study uses the 'service design' tools, starting from the real path that the inhabitants make in the cooperative, from accession, to the delivery of the accommodation, in order to define the new process of service delivery in respect of values and through new tools (both digital and physical interaction);
- Preliminary study of the digital platform: the answer to the new needs emerged leads to the construction of a digital platform which identifies the contents and the objectives, which interact directly with the inhabitants in the construction of a network of spaces and services for living.

In the first phase, the research focused on the study of the habits, connections and needs of the inhabitants of some virtuous cooperatives in Milan and Modena, and on the identification of the design hypotheses that could facilitate the interaction between the inhabitants and the urban services in the future. The individual interviews, based on

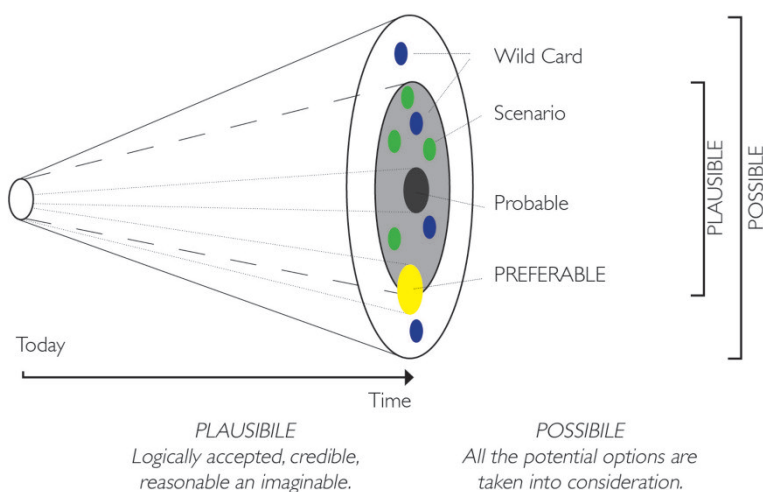
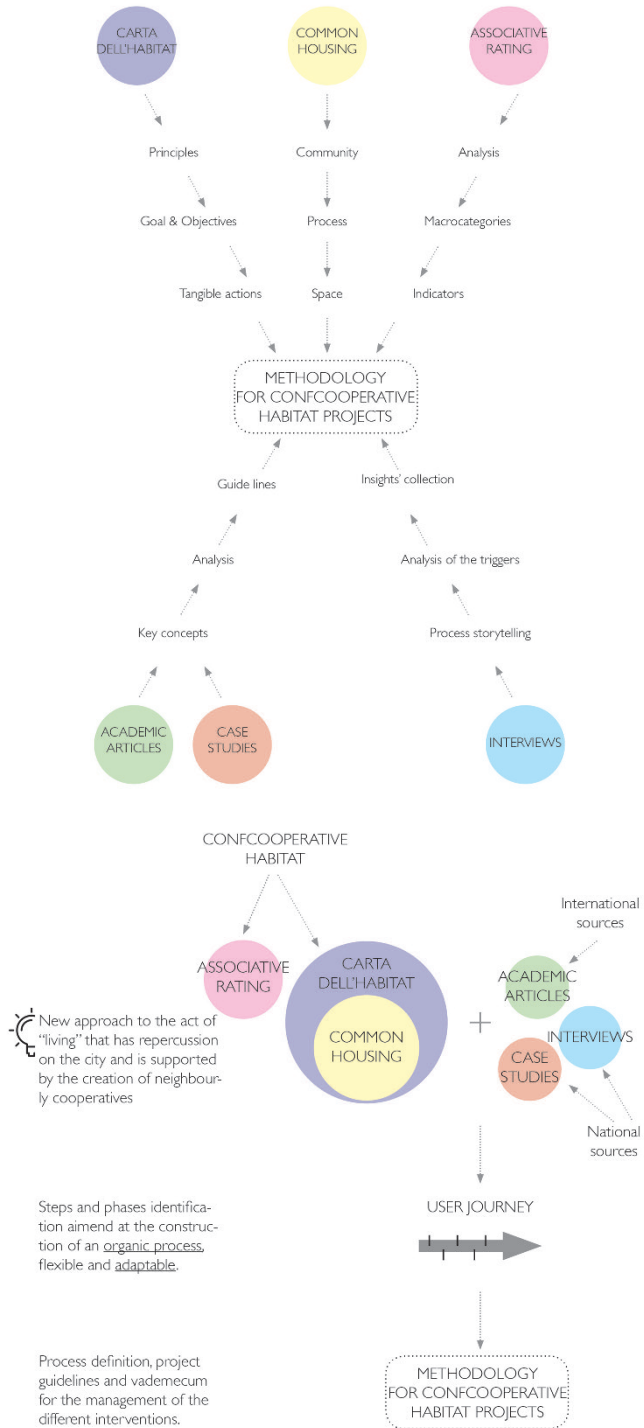


Fig. 1 - *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (credit: A Dunne and F. Raby, 2013).



a flexible scheme, focused on personal and family needs, community life, sharing, knowledge and interaction with the cooperative system. The needs expressed reflect a demographic complexity common in the cooperative, and a difficulty in defining shared needs, which are however divided into two categories: personal services and maintenance and care of the home. The multiple needs of the inhabitants – especially those linked to the different age groups and work commitments – make it difficult to reach a critical mass that can define services or assets of interest to all the condominiums. From the interviews a limited knowledge of the cooperative system emerges: most of the interviewees do not try to look for solutions for the purchase of goods or services in the cooperative world, because they consider their experience closed at the moment in which it comes into possession of the house, and refers to the building cooperative for bureaucratic or maintenance issues.

The state-of-the-art-study has reviewed the most interesting Italian cooperative interventions. Some operations reflect great foresight but results that are still far from the objectives, such as the cases of Via Cenni (Rossiprodi, 2016) and Quartiere Zoia in Milan (one of the subject of the interviews), both good practices and subject of competitions (the first open to designers and the second to cooperatives) by the municipal administration of Milan. These experiences have built the training/information/community building paths with the inhabitants, but, while making great strides forward and managing to better manage some collective decisions (relating to shared spaces, community gardens, bike workshop), they have not succeeded in creating communities that collaborate in the construction of the city. The study of some Swiss cooperatives (Jacomella, 2018), also visited by members of the National Council of Confcooperative Habitat, (documented on the association's web channels), is illuminating to better understand how to move in the new interventions envisaged, despite the basic cultural differences. Zurich is a pioneer city in Europe in the experimentation of new housing solutions (Boudet, 2017), and its cooperative system has historically distinguished itself among the main actors in the creation of the new urban fabric with around 30% of residential homes for rent of cooperative matrix.

In the Kalkbreite housing complex the compact architectural form that centrally collects the common spaces, defines the primary reason why the inhabitants, gathered in a cooperative, have been led to share practices, time and knowledge. The common identity has allowed us to experiment with some quality collective spaces such as a foyer, a canteen, a laundry, rentable offices, meeting rooms, a b&b, a nursery, a garden with games and a small conference centre. The popular district Kreis 4, was instead the protagonist of a process of urban regeneration, where some historic buildings were recently recovered by local cooperatives, defining common spaces and services. Other guided interventions can be considered Europaallee, which in its imposing size can define a wide

range of shared spaces, and the former industrial site of Zwicky Süd, where the functional and high social mixité does not prevent the construction of shared objectives and spaces. These experiences have in common: the cooperation, the participation of all the tenants and the enhancement of the possible common interests, which enable spaces and collaborative services.

The numerous national and international experiences of free aggregation of citizens, aimed at reducing housing problems or simply to activate housing forms rich in useful activities for the community, are certainly an important source of analysis and reference to evaluate the different types of information and categories of activities and services presented. The Solidarity San Giorgio Co-housing in Ferrara and the Barona Village in Milan show experiences in progress from which to draw some noteworthy ideas, both positive and negative. The mistake could be overestimated social and environmental outcomes built around them storytelling.

Background and Innovation – Collected the information necessary to determine the functionalities that the web platform will have to provide to citizens and co-operators, the main platforms and organizations on the market have been analysed so as to be able to include in the design the elements deemed most effective and interesting. The web platform should accompany the inhabitants from the discovery phase of local initiatives to the subsequent phases of assignment and integration in the new internal and external community of the building. The digital tool should allow building cooperatives to advertise their local initiatives and gather the interest of future members by identifying the main needs and establishing a direct communication channel that is always updated on the evolution of the intervention, following the example of the Swiss cooperatives. In the phases following the assignment of the housing unit, the platform must make it possible to establish a communication channel between the resident members and the condominium administration to meet the need for transparency and return up-to-date information on economic and administrative issues with a friendly interface for internal communication with other tenants. Subsequent developments of the platform will allow the creation of a channel of direct promotions by the cooperatives of local goods and services as well as a tool to support the resident members for the creation of buying groups or the sharing of services, necessary to form a community and improve quality of life.

Numerous national and international realities have been analysed and some interesting ideas have also been collected by online services, not strictly related to the real estate theme, which have been characterized by their effectiveness in interacting with users and simplicity and clarity in the user experience (for example Ioabitosocial – platform for sharing and choosing interventions in social housing, Ioabitoincommunity – app to improve community life within the neighbourhoods, or planet app – app for residents to learn and participate in the events of the quarter). The most interesting example is the Habx platform that forms the group of future inhabitants even before starting the

design and construction of housing, so as to obtain some important economies. These savings allow the companies participating in the platform to offer better quality homes, concentrating resources on what really matters to end users. The platform allows you to select a proposed project, from different companies and in the neighbourhood/city of interest, expressing your needs both in private spaces and in areas shared with the community, receive the project proposal and customize it with the help of the platform technicians, and finally to follow the construction process. Habx represents an interesting example of a platform for managing the co-design phase with users, above all for the experience of use, for the simplicity of presenting the different opportunities of choice and for the relationship of dialogue that is established with the user. The target audience is high economic level user, so it is very far from the cooperative model, but more oriented to the maximum personal performance of the individual intervention. Another example analysed which is a good reference, although referring to particular interventions, is Cohousing-Berlin, very community-oriented that starts research operations and cohousing in particular.

Another starting point of analysis is represented by the recent diffusion of web platforms for the promotion and management of crowdfunding initiatives, related to the real estate sector. There are mainly two different models of real estate crowdfunding based on the type of platform that places the instrument on the market: lending crowdfunding and equity crowdfunding. Some examples of operational realities in Italy are Walliance and Housers, through which it is possible to invest from home on a real estate project without having large amounts of capital. These platforms, despite being far from the objective of the new cooperatives, offer numerous points for reflection since in the selection and hierarchy of information to be exposed to users and in the management of the fundamental steps of the process (investment phase, planning, realisation, etc.) they have numerous points of contact with the needs identified for the Habitat platform.

As regards the research objectives, to the typical model of digital social platforms, it is necessary to combine more convivial tools, that is oriented to enable, support and facilitate the organization of activities to be carried out outside the virtual communication space, and therefore in the characterizing territory a community of place. This means designing systems with a particular attention to the collaborative and cooperative element that allow to support and assist the organization and management of practices that are aimed at achieving common objectives such as: improving the safety or decorum of common spaces, solving small conflicts between neighbours, lend objects or provide each other with assistance and help for daily activities, save money by doing group purchases or zero kilometres. The collaborative element has been identified as the main element that allows the people involved in a community of place to get to know each other and then understand how to complement each other's skills, abilities and interests, so as to improve common life and the place lived daily, without waiting for help from the authorities or social institutions.

The recurring themes and the way of presenting these realities have been identified

from the single best practices, and also some of the main design errors that create problems in urban communities have been underline (Francis, 2002): 1) take for granted key issues and not to seek an overall alignment of users, through information/training; 2) to insert excessive barriers which, conceived and designed to protect the community within it and from episodes of crime and traffic, discourage the inhabitants from moving on foot and create less social control in the common areas; 3) not understanding what the residents really want, leaving key investment and innovation decisions without guidance and information; 4) forget about the extra services (car-sharing, parking for bicycles, concierge services, etc.) that can create more cohesive neighbourhood communities, if the conditions, terms and desire of these services are expressed by the community itself; 5) create unwanted green spaces in terms of position, size and quality, without considering that the inhabitants of the neighbourhood might not see its usefulness, or share its purpose; 6) not starting from community interactions, and not designing spaces that encourage proximity relationships (entrance door directly onto the street, balconies that are no more than 10 meters apart, porticos and other devices that make the relationships more frequent and solid: being visible to neighbours makes the community more inclined to socialization and safer).

User journey and community building – The data collection allowed to define some desirable solutions for the construction of new collaborative cooperatives. To this end, in the second phase of the project, the collaboration between Push and the Agenzia per l’Abitare played a fundamental role in the search for the main functions of the digital platform and in identifying the moments of interaction between the virtual platform and physical community building actions. In fact, to define a collaborative community, all the phases of the process must be managed and accompanied, in particular the initial and ‘final’, of handing over the keys, which must not be the end of the process but an intermediate moment.

The key objective is the community building among the inhabitants, which must be achieved through some successive steps and the definition of the process phases that the inhabitants and all those involved in the construction can use (Confcooperative Habitat, the territory Agencies, the cooperatives). To reconstruct this methodological path, the following were related: a) the principles promoted by the Carta dell’Habitat systematized and hierarchical; b) the study on Common Housing in depth in light of the principles of the Carta dell’Habitat; c) the procedures in the associative rating have been integrated into the definition of the objectives; d) some articles concerning co-housing processes that present some points of contact with the new investigated processes (Kraus, 2002; Wang and Hadjri, 2017).

Through the analysis of the documents and principles proposed by Confcooperative Habitat (Carta dell’Habitat, Common Housing and Associative Rating), a User Journey was defined on which the procedural steps will be built. The Carta dell’Habitat consists of ten principles that aspire to the creation of a new urbanity starting from the interven-

tions promoted by Confcooperative Habitat. For each principle a goal has been identified (intended as the final goal, the result to be achieved at the end of the course), and one or more objectives (defined as a concrete and quantifiable result, functional to the achievement of the previously identified goal). For each objective the ‘what’, the ‘how’ and a set of concrete ‘tools and activities’ representing the tangible actions to be undertaken in the process were analysed (Fig. 4). After having analysed the 10 principles of the Carta dell’Habitat, having separated them into their logical components (what, how, actions), and having defined a system of consequentiality of the goals of each objective, it was analysed how they correlate with the identified steps in the User Journey.

The resulting hierarchy of the identified goals was linked to the steps defined in the User Journey (Fig. 5). From the analysis of the associative rating process connections emerged with the development of cooperative habitat projects which are not only formal, but also substantial, and which must be an integral part of the proposed methodology. The US context (Siciliano, 2009) was used as a basis for comparing the identified phases. Starting from the comparison of these phases, with what emerged from the first part of the study, all the phases were systematized and it was possible to outline the dif-

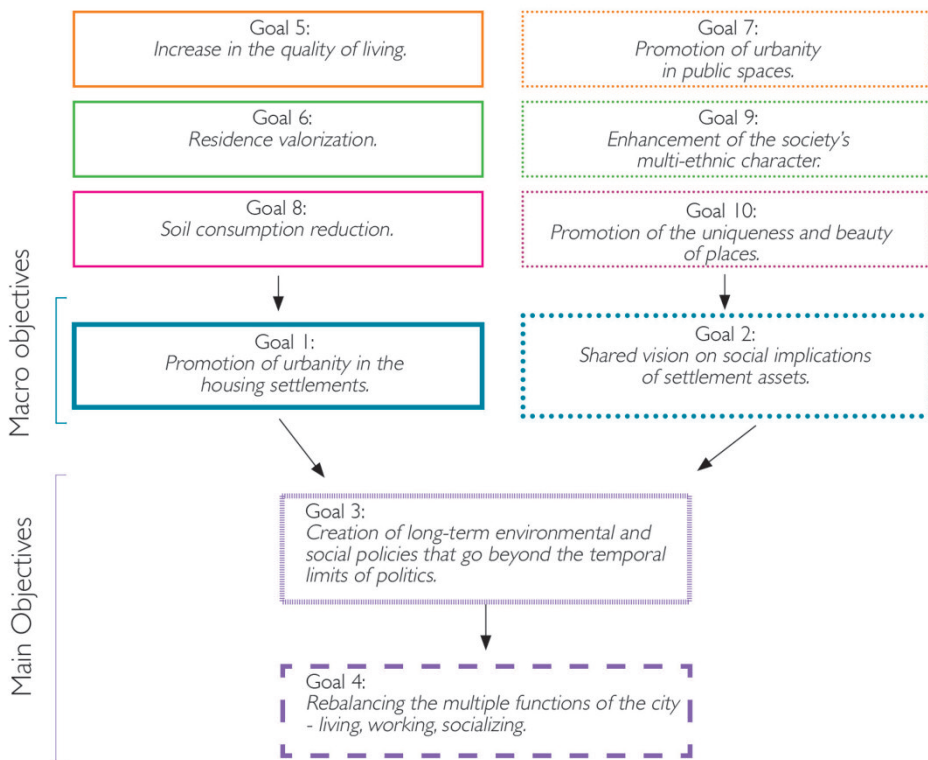


Fig. 4 - Analysis of the principles of the Carta dell’Habitat.

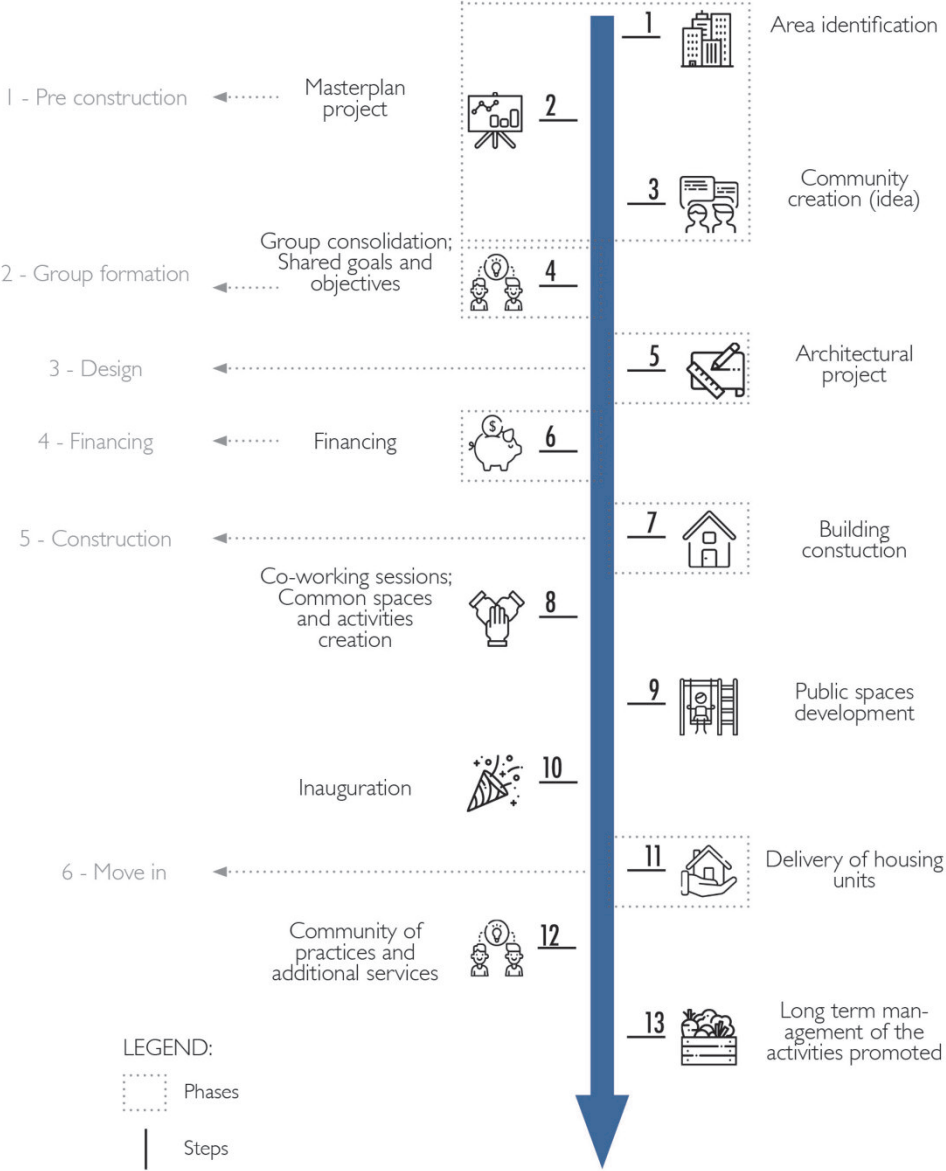


Fig. 5 - Definition of the User Journey.

ferent steps of the User Journey. The study of literature was then compared with the information obtained from the interviews and from the experience of the Agenzia per l’Abitare reversing the logical order to better adhere to the characteristics of the Italian cooperative context. The different goals are also characterized by a difference in terms of purpose, which can be linked to the creation of physical space or the social sphere. For each phase of the User Journey we tried to connect one or more goals derived from the Habitat Charter. When several goals are attributable to a single phase, the circle is divided into several segments. An exception is made for goals which, being considered ‘main objectives’ (pursuing a pact between the generations and making cities in the era of the metropolis) have a transversal dimension to the phases of the intervention.

The purpose of this study phase is to highlight the tangible actions to arrive at the concrete implementation of the principles promoted by Confcooperative Habitat. The guiding methodology for the process of constructing cooperative habitats in Italy focuses on the potentiality of the actions to be implemented so that the pre (and post) construction phases can effectively create the desired community cohesion. Through a simple and effective communication tool that can accompany the phases of the project, the operators of the sector will be able to guide the process more effectively and convey the most relevant messages related to their work. The inhabitants will be accompanied in the construction process and will be invited to continue defining new community initiatives. The methodology will focus on procedural aspects in order to be flexible and easy to apply even in very different contexts. The analysis, in the form of self-assessment, allows to define parameters and quality standards of the process, and at the same time to communicate the operations in progress with the users.

The described working method is declined in various tools that are made available to cooperatives: a Vademecum inspired by the principles of sustainable development and the new model of cooperative habitat desired, which concretizes the principles contained in the Habitat Charter, with instructions for create community cooperatives oriented to the principles of Common Housing; a Check List of things to do, steps to follow and key moments not to be underestimated, as a tool that simplifies a long and sometimes complex process at the base of the formation of the cooperative, which allows the actors to keep track of what it is done and what to do.

From the analyses previously conducted in the field, and from the study carried out during the last phase of work, it is clear that a digital platform represents the point of contact between Confcooperative Habitat, the resident members and the cooperative members to be able to transmit and implement the proposed innovations. The platform will have the role of highlighting the activities of cooperatives and members through a simple reading design. The showcase thus proposed can be used to clearly communicate the principles and actions promoted, and to interact with the cooperatives themselves. The platform will have the main purpose of telling and giving visibility to the initiatives promoted by Confcooperative Habitat. The strong point will be the proposed storytelling, focused on continuous communication of on-going activities and their progress over

time. The methodology previously proposed, represents the backbone of the site contents; based on this, the highlights of the journey will be told. The study conducted highlighted the importance of keeping active members informed on what is going on around them to ensure that the cooperative is effectively active. The choice to create an online platform is dictated by various factors, including the immediacy of contact with users and the ease of information exchange. However, this is only the showcase of a work that will take place mainly behind the scenes through the work of Confcooperative Habitat, the cooperative and the resident members.

Conclusions – The research, through the systematic analysis of the principles of cultural renewal of Confcooperative Habitat, aims to define a set of processes for the creation of cordiality cooperatives for the sharing of spaces, using relational skills, service design and community organizing. We respond to a need that is to redefine the relational centrality, within the settlement model (habitat), which includes a direct public (partners) and indirect (neighbourhood and thematic communities). The social impact that we want to generate must be able to connect the widespread leadership to the theme of mutuality and governance, to choose which needs to focus the design efforts on for the reference (hybrid) communities. The Common Housing, which amplifies the space and defines the places and services to an urban dimension, calls to action the cooperatives, aware of the new socio-demographic trends and of the new housing needs within our society, to develop effective responses to the new needs. The starting points are the associative mutual rating, which defines the rules within which to move, and a new founding document, the Carta dell’Habitat, both necessary to regain again the radical and innovative role that the cooperatives played during the 20th century (Jacomella, 2018).

The result of the study is the construction of a map of interactions to be developed among the inhabitants, in which the platform becomes a tool for future cooperatives with a view to new interventions in Common Housing, through new procedural methods spot on the quality of urban space. In the study undertaken, the focus of the problem seems to be the management of the community and the most significant elements that have emerged concern: 1) the need to involve the inhabitants starting from the embryonic phases of the project, trying to make them active protagonists; 2) the co-planning of spaces (above all common ones) that must be shared in order to represent an added value for the community; 3) the creation of systems for monitoring, controlling and auditing the project phases that determine a system of trust towards the cooperative and its actions; 4) constant monitoring that can help the internal management phases of the intervention and the development of the community; 5) the role of external experts (facilitators, housing managers, etc.) who administer and guide the processes. The strength of the communities is based on the sharing of environmental and social values, but it must have a constant support to avoid problems linked to a participatory process that is too horizontal and to be able to face the promises made initially, sharing the responsibility of individuals towards common operations.

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NOTES

- 1) Common Housing is here understood as an evolution of cooperative living extended to the neighbourhood. The term evolves the abused concept of 'social housing', which in Italy has had a lot of literature and little practical follow-up, and is limited to a rental housing offer that meets the needs of the grey population bracket. Common housing also differs from the concept of a Co-housing niche, which can be implemented for minimum groups of people who find common utility in living together. The Common Housing brand has been registered (A. Maggioni, President of Confcooperative Habitat) and is used by the new inhabitants' cooperatives that manage to define a system of places for living.
- 2) The Carta dell'Habitat is the founding document of the cooperative principles of making cities, understood as the promotion of urbanity, civil coexistence, beauty and the art of living in the settlement aggregates.
- 3) The Associative Mutualistic Rating is a system of continuous evaluation of the associated cooperatives developed to ensure the mutualistic, entrepreneurial and social quality.
- 4) The impact is understood as «long-term sustainable change (positive or negative; primary or secondary) in the conditions of people or in the environment that the intervention has partially contributed to achieving, since it is also influenced by other exogenous variables (directly or indirectly; intentionally or unknowingly)» (Zamagni, Venturi and Rago, 2015, p. 1).

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