# ‘Minimum dwelling’ *all'italiana*: from the *case popolari* to the 1929 ‘model houses’ of Garbatella

**ABSTRACT**

At the twelve congress of the International Federation of Housing and Town Planning (IFHTP), held in Rome in September 1929, a set of thirteen ‘model’ affordable houses situated in the garden suburb of Garbatella were presented to the delegates. While generally recognised as shining fragments from a distinctly ‘Roman’ register of idiosyncratic architectural modernism, the dwellings of Garbatella’s Lot XXIV also deserve to be reappraised as a key symbolic moment in the history of interwar Italian architecture and urban planning; and an alternative vision for a scaleable model of modern ‘minimum dwelling’ (*Existenzminimum*). I analyse the project in the context of the 1929 IFHTP congress in Rome as a carefully staged attempt to juxtapose an alternative, ‘third way’ vision of architectural design for urban social housing that sought to accommodate the emerging international modernist canon of functionality with individual architectural design and respect for regional building traditions.

**KEYWORDS**: mass housing, Rome, minimum dwelling, Existenzminimum, IFHTP, CIAM, Garbatella, modernism, functionalism.

**1928-29: mass affordable housing under the spotlight**

On 28 October 1929, a group of 200 international group of architects and urban planners, members of the International Congress for Modern Architecture (*Congrès International pour l’Architecture Moderne*, CIAM), met in Frankfurt.[[1]](#endnote-2) The Frankfurt conference was dedicated to the discussion of the ‘minimum dwelling’ (*Wohnung für das* *Existenzminimum* in German; *habitation minimum* in French) - a programme of affordable, yet hygienic and scientifically designed housing that could be deployed on a mass scale to address the mounting housing crisis that afflicted Europe since the end of WW1. The conference location was highly symbolic too, for it was in Frankfurt that the most ambitious in vision and scale experiment in public (municipal in this case) housing was already in full swing.[[2]](#endnote-3) The proceedings were hosted by Ernst May, the city’s chief municipal architect who had been a founding member of CIAM at La Sarraz, Switzerland in 1928 and had volunteered to host the group’s 1929 conference.

May had also recently attended and addressed another international conference with a similar housing focus. In the summer of 1928 the International Federation of Housing and Town Planning (IFHTP) held its eleventh conference in Paris dedicated to the subject of housing.[[3]](#endnote-4) Of the three main thematic categories, May contributed to the discussion on the ‘cost of construction’ of affordable housing through an extensive presentation of the ‘New Frankfurt’ (*Neue Frankfurt*) schemes that he was supervising at the time;[[4]](#endnote-5) but Frankfurt also featured prominently in the section on ‘housing for the very poor’, introduced by Henri Sellier, mayor of the French ‘new town’ of Suresnes in the outskirts of Paris.[[5]](#endnote-6) Unlike CIAM, which was a small group that was formed around more or less shared values about the form and function of modern architecture, the IFHTP was a significantly larger - in arithmetic and national membership - and more divided organisation.[[6]](#endnote-7) One of its presidents, the British planner Raymond Unwin, had in fact promoted the diversity of ideas within the organisation as a sign of strength and intellectual vitality.[[7]](#endnote-8) Still, the housing issue proved too controversial and polarising for a more multi-faceted and heterogeneous organisation like the IFHTP than the smaller and more coherent in programmatic philosophy CIAM.[[8]](#endnote-9) The Federation’s roots in the garden city movement (Ebenezer Howard was its first president) made it programmatically opposed to further urbanisation and particularly to high-density developments within existing urban cores. Members were also divided, along ideological and geographic lines, over the role of the private sector in the provision of social housing: while primarily British and North American delegates favoured a flexible system of construction and financing with extensive private input, socialist members from the continent stood by the principle of public housing supplied and paid by state or municipal authorities.[[9]](#endnote-10) Unlike CIAM, the IFHTP could hardly speak with one voice when it came to the housing question.

A little over a month before the opening of CIAM’s 1929 congress in Frankfurt, the IFHTP held its own twelfth congress that was also by far the largest in terms of participation, involving nearly 1,500 delegates from 60 countries.[[10]](#endnote-11) The organisers put together a rich twelve-day programme featuring plenary sessions, thematic discussions, and guided visits to both historic and contemporary sites of interest. Although the congress was scheduled to move on its sixth day to Naples and eventually, on 21 September, to Milan (for the closing session), this was unmistakably Rome’s moment in the sun - the first time that an Italian city had been selected to host a major international architectural or planning event. Two of the core themes of the congress - the expansion of historic cities and the adaptation of historic urban centres to address needs and pressures derived from modern life - rendered, in theory, Rome the ideal backdrop for such discussions.[[11]](#endnote-12)

Less well-known is another side-event planned for the conference delegates and the accompanying international journalists. A special tour across Rome’s new public housing quarters brought them to the suburb of Garbatella, in the southern periphery of Rome. The *pièce de résistance* of the tour was a visit to a brand new ensemble of houses built by the city’s Institute of Public Housing (*Istituto per le Case Popolari*, ICP) as a poignant postscript to the Paris conference’s exploration of new types of affordable housing. A total of thirteen ‘model houses’ designed by six different architects were constructed within four months on a new plot of land (Lot XXIV) according to the strict stipulations of a competition announced in the spring of 1929. The competition’s brief set standards for plot coverage, size and configuration of the units, construction techniques, and formal characteristics, fixing the maximum cost per habitable room at a modest L8,000 (approximately $400 then or c.$6,000 in today’s value).

While generally recognised as shining fragments from a distinctly ‘Roman’ register of idiosyncratic architectural modernism that made its (brief) appearance during the second half of the 1920s, the model dwellings of Garbatella’s Lot XXIV also deserve to be reappraised as parts of a much richer and more complex picture of experimentation with hybrid types of affordable housing in the interwar years. In this article, I appraise the project of Lot XXIV as a key but largely neglected symbolic moment in the history of interwar Italian architecture and urban planning. I approach it through its intended symbolic function as a confident declaration of intent and *tangible* proof of concept by a country that had remained until then largely peripheral to the international architectural debates but now aspired to be a leading, autonomous voice in the field. I also locate it in the wider story of the extraordinary in scope and resourceful in solutions housing innovation driven by the ICP (and its Rome branch in particular) that, in hindsight, reached its shining peak in 1928-30 before dissipating rapidly afterwards. Finally I analyse the presentation of the project in the context of the 1929 IFHTP congress in Rome as a carefully staged attempt to juxtapose an alternative, ‘third way’ vision of architectural design for urban social housing to the entrenched ideological and aesthetic positions of the interwar years; [[12]](#endnote-13) a vision that sought to accommodate the emerging international modernist canon of functionality with individual architectural design and respect for regional building traditions.

## Italian architects emerge from the shadow: from Vienna (1926) via Stuttgart (1927) and Paris (1928) to Rome (1929).

The question of modern affordable housing emerged as a central concern for governments, municipal authorities, and architects in the post-World War One period. Dramatic pressures generated from shifting demographic and economic trends (including industrialisation and the difficulties involved in the return to a peacetime economy), from rapid social developments (such as urbanisation and growing social unrest), as well as from the material devastation caused by the four-year military conflict, created or exacerbated an unprecedented housing crisis in most European countries. In essence, this crisis involved a vicious circle of rocketing demand for social housing, insufficient supply of adequate dwellings, and a deeper crisis of affordability, especially for those on the lower strata of the social pyramid. Diagnoses of, and responses to, the post-World War One housing crisis divided governments and parties along existing and newly formed ideological faultlines, with very different repertoires of solutions offered by communist, social democratic, liberal, conservative, and authoritarian political forces. In addition, however, deep divisions as to the best way forward emerged among architects and urban planners. The rise of the modern architectural movement in the 1920s pushed the housing question to the top of the agenda of radical social reform or even revolutionary change. Viewing the family home as the hub of a utopian desire to forge a better world, modernist architects turned their attention to the urgent need for modern, rationally designed, and hygienic dwellings, with optimal supply of light and air, with low costs of rent or ownership, and in harmonious relation to their surrounding social and ambiental context. As a result, designing and constructing ‘model houses’ in adequate supply for the masses became a key challenge for architects in the interwar years – a challenge that touched on matters of ideology, politics, and economics as well as being related to design, aesthetics, and visions of domesticity.[[13]](#endnote-14)

The modern movement and the housing question intersected in fascinating and deeply influential ways during the 1920s – not just in search for a quick solution to the crisis but in the context of an intrinsically utopian pursuit that placed the family dwelling at the heart of a wider programme of social change. In July 1927, the International Exhibition of the German Werkbund opened its doors in Stuttgart, representing a defining moment in the annals of modernist architecture in general and modernist social housing in particular. The occasion was marked by the unveiling of a model housing estate (*Weißenhofsiedlung*), where the organisers of the exhibition had invited seventeen renowned architects – among them Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Bruno Taut, and Ludwig Hilberseimer - to design and execute thirty-three prototypes for modernist affordable housing that could be rolled out as a solution to the post-WW1 housing crisis.[[14]](#endnote-15) Alongside the estate - and largely overshadowed by it -, an international exhibition of housing plans and models under the title ‘Housing’ (*Die Wohnung*) provided the stage for a somewhat more international and diverse set of perspectives on the theme of affordable housing.[[15]](#endnote-16) In addition to the five countries already represented by the houses of the Weissenhofsiedlung, the organisers invited national participations from Austria, the United States of America, Switzerland, and - rather surprisingly - Italy.

Until that point, and with the notable exception of the shooting star that was the Futurist firebrand architect Antonio Sant’Elia (who died in 1916 at the age of twenty-eight), Italy had remained peripheral to the international deliberations about the future direction of modern architecture, urban planning, and public housing. The highly respected Italian architect Gustavo Giovannoni had, alongside Giannino Ferrini and Alessandro Schiavi, played an important role in translating and re-contextualising the theory of the garden city to correspond to the particular social, cultural, and environmental idiosyncrasies of post-WW1 Italy - but his influence at this stage did not extend much outside of the country.[[16]](#endnote-17) His collaboration with the ICP on two housing projects for the periphery of Rome based on the garden-city type - Aniene and Garbatella[[17]](#endnote-18) - resulted in interesting solutions to the problems facing a historic but rapidly expanding city like Rome. Meanwhile the rise of the Fascist regime after 1922 had introduced another largely unpredictable entity into the political and cultural mix of interwar Europe, only a few years after the revolution that had installed a communist regime in Russia. No matter how the leadership of the Werkbund, the IFHTP, and later CIAM sought to navigate the troubled political waters by declaring an officially a-political stance, the Fascist regime was an ideological and political maverick whose views on urban planning, economics, and state welfare were either unknown at that stage or largely at odds with those held by the majority of the federation’s membership and represented states.[[18]](#endnote-19)

Still, there were already ample signs that Italy’s peripheral status in the international architectural field was about to change.[[19]](#endnote-20) Under the surface and away from the international limelight, architecture in Italy was entering a new phase in the late 1920s - and a significantly more confident, international in outlook, and ambitious in cultural horizon one. The north of the country was the fulcrum of the new wave of Italian modernist architects, the so-called rationalists, who by the end of the decade were busy preparing a daring bid to sanction their brand of architecture as regime’s official ‘state art’ (*arte di stato*).[[20]](#endnote-21) The rationalists also established links with CIAM that culminated in an extensive Italian participation in the CIAM conference on the ‘functional city’ that took place in the summer of 1933.[[21]](#endnote-22) At the same time, the more grounded and practical IFHTP meetings appealed to a very different constituency of Italian architects and planners. At the 1926 congress in Vienna, the first Italian contribution to be recorded at an IFHTP session had an exclusive Milanese flavour, with the head of the municipal planning office (and subsequent author of the city’s new regulatory plan) Cesare Albertini[[22]](#endnote-23) and Milan’s Councillor for Building Cesare Chiodi[[23]](#endnote-24) making key interventions on the theme of urban planning in Milan and Italy respectively. Two years later, at the 1928 congress held in Paris, the Italian participation was more extensive and diverse, featuring representatives from both the Milanese and the Roman branches of the ICP.

Therefore, the invitation extended to Italy to participate in the 1927 Stuttgart exhibition may have seemed like a public relations coup for the Italian architectural profession; but it also acknowledged the dynamism of a young(er) generation of practitioners from different schools, design sensibilities, and regions of the country.[[24]](#endnote-25) The person entrusted by the Weissenhof exhibition organisers with the task of selecting a representative sample of Italian modern housing plans, the art historian Roberto Papini, opted for a kaleidoscopic perspective that sought to reconcile a host of very different programmatic and regional trends under the banner of a ‘new architecture’.[[25]](#endnote-26) Papini stretched his brief to include plans by members of the young dissidents of Gruppo 7 (Sebastiano Larco, Carlo Enrico Rava), by rising stars of Italian *razionalismo* Adalberto Libera and Alberto Sartoris, and by a group of Rome-based architects linked to the figures of Alberto Calza Bini and Pietro Aschieri.[[26]](#endnote-27) The role of Calza Bini in raising the profile of work in the domain of public housing that was being carried out by the ICP as a whole and by its Roman branch in particular cannot be exaggerated. [[27]](#endnote-28) It was no coincidence that Aschieri was represented in Stuttgart by his design for a new model quarter destined for artisans in Rome (*Quartiere dell’Artigianato*) that had won the competition organised by the ICP in 1926.[[28]](#endnote-29) Although never realised, the design of Aschieri’s team (featuring also input from De Renzi and Marchi, both of who would be involved in the Lot XXIV project – see below) marked the beginning of a prolific phase in the architectural production of the ICP in the capital that would deliver a dizzying number of important housing projects executed within a period of less than five years.[[29]](#endnote-30)

At the 1928 IFHTP congress in Paris, the theme of low-cost housing aimed for those unable to afford market prices for either ownership or rent provided the perfect occasion for a sizeable Italian representation at the proceedings. The senior municipal official of Rome’s municipal administration Virgilio Testa spoke on the overall context of urban and regional planning in Italy.[[30]](#endnote-31) The Milanese engineer and vice-president of the ICP Giuseppe Gorla gave an extensive presentation on the theme of ‘housing for the very poor’. [[31]](#endnote-32) Gorla presented the recent housing experiments carried out by the Milanese ICP (the low-cost, medium-density quarters of Regina Elena and XXVIII Ottobre, both designed by Giovanni Broglio[[32]](#endnote-33)). Gorla spoke in unmistakably paternalistic terms of the Institute’s mission to “educate” the masses through the provision of basic but hygienic accommodation. Living in the new ICP quarters meant adhering to a strict regime of rules and obligations aimed at enforcing a new social consciousness both within the family dwelling and inside the neighbourhood. Allocation to these living premises, described as *ultra-popolari* by virtue of their higher density, simpler design, and lower construction cost, was intended to be temporary; only those deemed responsive to the Institute’s disciplinary norms would be then provided with a permanent place in the ICP’s network of public housing.[[33]](#endnote-34) Chiodi defended the reticence of Italian municipal authorities towards new mass construction systems pioneered elsewhere in northern and central Europe by arguing that their suitability for the Italian context was still far from proven in either financial or aesthetic terms.[[34]](#endnote-35) Chiodi also defended the building types used by the ICP for low-cost housing in Milan and other Italian cities, pointing out that they balanced effectively the needs for rapid mass construction, for rational distribution of urban and living spaces, and for diversity of built forms.[[35]](#endnote-36)

Overall, the Vienna and Paris IFHTP congresses were animated and often acrimonious affairs. Disagreement among national delegations reflected much deeper polarities - ideological, aesthetic, social -within the field of European architecture during the 1920s. In Vienna delegates disagreed on issues such as the ideal building type and height for public housing; on the optimal relation between urban, suburban, and rural; on the relation between family dwelling and neighbourhood; and on the respective role of public and private sectors in the provision of housing for the masses. In Paris disagreements extended even further to building methods, optimal size and cost per unit, as well as external presentation and overall urban form.[[36]](#endnote-37) While the benefits of a ‘rational’ approach to space distribution, design, and large-scale planning were programmatically accepted at the proceedings, tensions between a scientific and an aesthetic approach to affordable and mass-produced public housing were far from diffused at the Paris congress.

Fourteen months after the closing of the proceedings in Paris, on the morning of 12 September 1929, the Rome congress kicked off in suitable pageantry on the morning at the imposing municipal building on the Campidoglio hill, with a separate national exhibition dedicated to housing and regulatory plans for a series of Italian cities hosted at the nearby Palazzo delle Esposizioni. For the organisers this was a unique opportunity to exhibit Rome and Italy to the world as both past and present. As Testa acknowledged, the alignment between the international conference and the national exhibition served the purpose of demonstrating to the rest of the world “the great progress of Italy achieved under the Fascist regime” in the fields of housing and urban planning.[[37]](#endnote-38) Calza Bini, speaking in his dual capacity as president of the ICP and head of the syndicate of architects, spoke briefly about “the regenerative fervour” with which the Fascist regime had tackled the big questions of urban housing and planning. This is why, he explained, the main proceedings were framed by a series of parallel exhibitions showcasing the best examples of public housing constructed or planned by the regional branches of the ICP and other state organisations; and by a series of organised visits to particular housing projects. Among them Calza Bini singled out one - the new suburb of Garbatella, where the congress delegates could visit “[model] hostels for those evicted from their houses and a small, modern quarter that was constructed in four months … product of the harmonious collaboration between builders, architects, and workers”.[[38]](#endnote-39)

## Low-cost and affordable housing in interwar Italy

In broad terms, the repertoire of public housing solutions in post-WW1 Italy presented a fault line between those dwellings destined for workers (*case popolari*) and the lower-middle professional classes (*case economiche*). The two categories were distinguished according to cost and size; but in addition they referred to different solutions in terms of general appearance and feel, with the *case economiche* reproducing more extensively elements of the traditional ‘bourgeois’ house in both external look (e.g. more extensive decorative elements derived from neoclassical, baroque or neo-medieval lexicons) and internal organisation (e.g. individual services; relative size of different rooms; etc). Finally, there was a further distinction that concerned the location of each type of housing: while *case popolari* tended to be located in the outskirts of the urban core or in new peripheral quarters/‘villages’, case *economiche* were typically more centrally located.

Nevertheless, such was the extent of the housing crisis in the years after the end of WW1 that the ICP was forced to supplement and diversify its repertoire of popular housing solutions at the bottom end of the scale. The combined pressures from population increase in the Italian cities (largely the result of internal migration from the countryside) and severe economic dislocation caused by the war and the difficulties of transition to peacetime economy created a volume of urgent demand for housing units that could not possibly be met in Italy given the existing political structures and financial limits.[[39]](#endnote-40) The result was that, from the early 1920s onwards, the branches of the ICP experimented with various combinations of rapid, low-cost, high(er)-density, simplified design-wise, and even temporary in character constructions. In the ICP nomenclature these were referred to at various points as ‘rapid’ (*case rapide*) or ‘ultra-popular’ (*case popolarissime* or *ultrapopolare*)[[40]](#endnote-41) or – mainly in the 1930s - ‘minimal’ (*case minime*) houses.

The combination of a prolonged severe housing shortage in the 1920s and escalating cost of construction proved a significant challenge for the ICP and other housing providers.[[41]](#endnote-42) With the new regulatory framework put in place on 30 August 1925 (RD1548), the maximum number of habitable rooms per type of dwelling was fixed at five for the ‘economical’ and three for the ‘popular’ types respectively; this number excluded any service rooms, such as bathroom, kitchen or storage.[[42]](#endnote-43) Such figures involved a significant reduction from the stipulations of the earlier 1919 regulation (RD1857, 23.3.1919), which had been fixed at ten and six respectively.[[43]](#endnote-44) Still, any potential financial gains for the ICP from the reduction in the number of rooms were a drop in the ocean when compared to the soaring construction cost for each room, which increased fourfold between 1914 and 1927, reaching between L10,000 and L12,000.[[44]](#endnote-45) With the advent of the Fascist regime, the gradual lifting of wartime rent restrictions and the demolition campaigns against slums in major urban centres caused further bottlenecks in housing provision.[[45]](#endnote-46) As the level of increase in public funding for housing projects could not keep up with the growing demand and as revenue from rents charged by the ICP had to remain under strict control to avoid social discontent, the still significant increase of housing supply by the key ICP branches in Milan and Rome by mid-1920s (up to fivefold in the case of Milan since the end of WW1; and threefold in Rome during the same period)[[46]](#endnote-47) failed to even approximate the growing demand for new housing stock at affordable prices.

It was the pressure from above to provide more dwellings at a faster rate in order to keep pace with growing demand while keeping costs at bay that prompted the ICP authorities to think of alternative models of affordable mass housing in the mid-1920s. In comparison to the situation in the advanced countries of northern Europe, progress in the field of public housing in Italy was hampered by a lack of deeper understanding of the ‘rational’ methods of architectural design and construction. In addition, Broglio acknowledged that the Italian housing regulations were far more restrictive in comparison to those in Germany, France or Austria, for example stipulating a significantly larger minimum height for each floor.[[47]](#endnote-48) When it came to the northern European type of row housing, the ICP authorities continued to be sceptical about its applicability in the Italian context, defending their preference for individual family homes or smaller-size groupings of dwellings in a single edifice of modest footprint and height.[[48]](#endnote-49) This was a solution strongly supported by Calza Bini himself, who praised the model of the suburban low-density workers’ quarter for offering a superior quality of life for its inhabitants and thus fulfil the ICP’s constitutional commitment to elevate the masses, both physically and morally.[[49]](#endnote-50) When back in 1926 the Ministry of Finance commissioned a report on the best approach to the design and construction of affordable mass housing, the findings reiterated the conventional practice among the Institute’s regional technical offices - namely, that standardisation of methods of construction and rational use of space should be prioritised over over-simplification of external design.[[50]](#endnote-51) Still, Calza Bini defended the shift to semi-intensive alternatives, especially in the form of single perimeter blocks or higher edifices with five or more floors[[51]](#endnote-52), because it promised to curtail construction costs per room and achieve a higher yield of dwellings in order to absorb the growing demand for public housing at affordable rent.

In addition to increasing the density of the quarters, the ICP experimented with three further strategies for lowering the cost of construction of mass housing in the 1920s. The first prioritised speed and bulk of construction over quality, resilience over time, and aesthetic value. In 1923, the ICP in Rome published the brief of a competition for the construction of a significant number of ‘rapid houses’ (*case rapide*), of one or two floors and with dwellings of between one and three habitable rooms. Although the brief explicitly ruled out materials such as timber or plaster, it did not conceal the institute’s primary intention to provide houses that “combined the most rapid construction and the lowest cost possible”, the latter fixed at L6,000 per room.[[52]](#endnote-53) 267 of these houses, totalling 902 rooms, were completed in 1924, concentrated in the two new ICP ‘garden cities’ of Garbatella and Aniene.[[53]](#endnote-54) The following year also saw the construction of a group of special ‘rapid’ houses in another part of Garbatella for those moved from the demolished slums in the outskirts of Rome. Unlike the earlier rapid homes, these were designed by the ICP’s own technical team, following nine standardised building forms that featured between four and fourteen dwellings of one or two habitable rooms, and costing between c. L6,000-L7,500 per habitable room.[[54]](#endnote-55)

The other two strategies used by the ICP to manage the housing crisis and improve the supply of very affordable accommodation in the mid-1920s took one of the principles that contributed to lower construction cost to a more extreme implementation. While in the case of the higher-density developments of Garbatella in Rome or XXVIII October in Milan the architects had followed the Institute’s guidelines to simplify design features but not compromise the overall aesthetic and ambiental value of the building, some branches experimented with designs that were notably more functional in appearance. The example of the *case per gli umili* (houses for people with a ‘humble’ background) that was constructed in Bologna in the mid-1920s offers early insights into a public housing type that would become increasingly popular in the ICP repertoire in the following decade (the so-called *popolarissime,* meaning ‘ultra-popular’). The new quarter featured buildings typically of five floors with a strikingly simple external appearance that mirrored a series of cost-saving decisions in terms of the size and amenities of the individual dwellings. The project, located outside the medieval city walls in an area isolated from the rest of the city by railway lines, was destined to house families with very low income deemed ‘unsuitable’ and even ‘harmful’ to urban life. Those families had been earmarked for immediate eviction from slum-like areas of the historic centre or had already been moved to temporary hostels occupying disused army barracks and hospitals.[[55]](#endnote-56)

The second cost-cutting strategy for mass production of affordable housing arose as a response to the generally poor conditions of life in such municipal or charity hostels (*ricoveri*) used to provide basic temporary shelter to homeless people who were unable to afford any other kind of rented accommodation, either private or public. In response, ICP branches in Rome, Milan, and Florence invested in new, large-size hostels (called *alberghi*) that offered higher-quality accommodation on a strictly *temporary* basis. In Rome, four such hostels (called *Alberghi Luzzatti*) were constructed in Garbatella during the second half of the 1920s, representing a significant investment by the ICP (about one-third of its budget, amounting to L15m).[[56]](#endnote-57) The ICP presented these hostels as a scaleable model of temporary accommodation that promised to provide a superior and sustainable solution to the housing crisis in Rome in comparison to the squalid and degrading *ricoveri*.[[57]](#endnote-58) Each occupying a full block, the Luzzatti hostels of Garbatella offered a range of interesting designs and articulations, combining rational use of space and construction with a higher degree of attention to external decorative details and urban scenographic effects. In total, the hostels offered 450 dwellings of different room count but strictly communal services. This involved not just bathrooms but also kitchens, as there was a sizeable refectory space in one of the hostels. One of the hostels in particular, the Albergo Rosso (meaning ‘red’, from the striking hue of its external walls), was widely praised at the time, both in Italy and in international congresses, and was showcased at the IFHTP congresses in Paris and Rome.[[58]](#endnote-59)

### Squaring the circle? The competition for the houses of Lot XXIV in Garbatella

As a result of experimenting with some or all of the solutions discussed above, the ICP’s overall housing output continued to grow significantly in the second half of the 1920s, though still at a rate that could not outstrip demand. By the end of 1929, the authorities of Rome’s ICP branch expected that three quarters of their c.40,000 rooms would belong to the ‘popular’ (as opposed to ‘economical’) type.[[59]](#endnote-60) More tellingly, of the 11,000 rooms planned in Rome for 1929, 8,000 fell under the category of ‘rapid’ or ‘ultra-popolari/intensivi’, with only about 1,300 rooms belonging to non-intensive developments.[[60]](#endnote-61) At the same time, the Institute had come under severe pressure from above to revise its practices by lowering previously used standards in order to produce more, faster and cheaper. Savings had already been achieved in the various experiments with the *case popolarissime* type, the average cost of which was typically between 10% and 20% lower than that of the standard *case popolare*. This, however, was not seen as enough progress by the municipal authorities of Rome that kept pushing for further savings and slashing construction costs while also forcing the Institute to keep rents low.[[61]](#endnote-62) The ICP entered 1929 under the grave shadow of a rapidly worsening relationship with the new governor of Rome Boncompagni Ludovisi, who had succeeded the more pliable Ludovico Spada Potenziani in September 1928 and had wasted no time to criticise the overall strategic direction of the ICP housing programme.[[62]](#endnote-63) To the consternation of Calza Bini, not just the housing crisis but also political will and severe financial constraints risked turning the ICP into a housing provider of the last resort and overwhelmingly for the most disadvantaged sections of the urban poor.[[63]](#endnote-64)

This is why the 1929 IFHTP congress offered the ICP a unique opportunity to prove multiple points to different constituencies. Announced in March 1929 as the most significant component of the Institute’s preparation for the congress, the competition for the thirteen so-called ‘model houses’ of Garbatella’s Lot XXIV involved thirteen individually designed housing units organised in a single large plot of land at the south-east corner of Garbatella. The brief fixed the maximum cost per (habitable) room at L8,000; and half that figure for every utility room.[[64]](#endnote-65) The cost was higher than that of the earlier *case rapide*; but at the same time it represented a significant saving in comparison to the standard average expenditure for the ICP’s *case popolari* (c. L10,000-12,000 by that time) and an even more substantial one vis-à-vis the more expensive Luzzatti hostels in Garbatella (which commanded a price of c. L14,000 per room).[[65]](#endnote-66) The cost looked even more impressive when compared to equivalent international rates: even in the - much-lauded for its rationalisation - case of municipal affordable housing in Frankfurt, the average cost of construction and the subsequent level of rent that had to be charged were significantly higher, making them unsuitable for Italy.[[66]](#endnote-67)

The Lot XXIV project presented a unique challenge that set the bar very high, promising something akin to squaring the proverbial circle of modern, affordable mass housing.[[67]](#endnote-68) It sought to mediate and reconcile perspectives that up to that point had been regarded as incompatible: substantially lower construction costs in the context of a low-density development made up from individual two-storey detached buildings without excessive standardisation of design or of spatial organisation. Each of the thirteen model houses was allocated to a single architect from a pool of six younger local professionals with a record of collaboration with the ICP in other projects across Rome. The architects involved in the project represented three young generations of Italian architectural talent active in Rome at the time - from the forty-year-old Pietro Aschieri and Plinio Marconi who was thirty-five, to the rising stars Mario de Renzi (thirty-one) and Gino Cancellotti (thirty-two), and finally to the only recently graduated Luigi Vietti and Mario Marchi (both still in their twenties). Three architects (de Renzi, Vietti, and Marchi) constructed two edifices each, while Aschieri and Cancellotti produced three; in addition, there was an extra building executed by Marconi, an architect of the ICP’s Technical Office with a notable portfolio of earlier projects in Garbatella who was given overall responsibility for the project of Lotto XXIV.[[68]](#endnote-69) Each unit comprised between two and six apartments with a range of two to four habitable rooms plus kitchen and utilities. The total number of rooms was 210, organised in 44 apartments that were constructed according to more traditional Italian and Roman standards of masonry, using tried-and-tested local material like tufa and brick. In accordance with the more traditional building regulations in effect in Italy, each floor maintained the (generous in comparison to regulations in other countries – see above) minimum height of 3,25m. Furthermore, kitchens were treated by the architects as fully habitable rooms, which meant that they were sizeable and with direct access to light and air, again in contrast to more stringent regulations in northern European solutions to the ‘minimum’ type of public housing (<10m2 and in the case of the famous ‘Frankfurt kitchen’ introduced by May down to 5.5-6.5m2 or even less in subsequent smaller units).[[69]](#endnote-70) According to the competition brief, each kitchen also needed to feature an adjacent alcove (again with independent access to light) with a washbasin and space for cooking utensils. Spacious kitchens, in conjunction with generously sized habitable rooms and the prerequisite of a corridor space, meant that the overall size of the individual apartments was also significantly higher than the equivalent standards in the countries of the north - from a minimum of 75m2 for those with two habitable rooms to 90m2 for the three-room variant; this compared very favourably to the ‘absolute minimum’ for a one-family apartment of 32m2 that Ernst May had stipulated for his Frankfurt flats.[[70]](#endnote-71) Finally, each apartment featured an independent entrance from the outside, with the use of external staircases stipulated for those apartments situated on an upper floor.[[71]](#endnote-72)

No specific guidelines about the external appearance of the edifices were stipulated in the competition brief, beyond the important requirement that the solutions offered by each architect should comply to the general standards of the Institute and allow future scaling of each building type.[[72]](#endnote-73) As a result, each architect were able to infuse their respective buildings with their own vision of architecture for public housing that was modern in conception and distribution yet rooted in the Roman ambiental and cultural traditions; dignified in the standard of living that it offered yet economical in execution; individual yet unassuming in design terms. Still, in spite of their differences in size, shape, distribution, and decoration, all thirteen buildings of Lot XXIV worked as an architectural ensemble by virtue of their thoughtful distribution over the extended surface of the plot and their integration with the open spaces that separated them.[[73]](#endnote-74) They also retained an admirable degree of uniformity of standards of accommodation offered to their prospective tenants. Building No. 1 in particular, by Mario de Renzi captured perfectly the transitional, highly experimental phase of the ICP’s architecture in Rome during the second half of the 1920s: a single edifice with a symmetrical, classically-inspired yet stripped-down facade featuring two columns and a simplified pediment, yet at the same time subverting traditional conventions on the side and the back with an asymmetrical distribution of features such as corner windows and balconies with unmistakably modern metal railings.[[74]](#endnote-75) Alongside the two adjacent, more traditionally-inspired buildings by Marchi (Nos. 2 and 3), it formed part of the most visible gateway to the plot from the main street that delineated the southern limit of Garbatella. The two buildings executed by Vietti (Nos. 11 and 12) followed a perfectly symmetrical pattern of distribution, featuring external staircases on the facade and a rhythmic tension between the arched entrances and the various types of simple, rectangular windows of different sizes and placements along the external sides of the edifices. A different design approach was followed by Aschieri, whose buildings (Nos. 4, 8, and 9) presented a more complex structure and distribution by virtue of their larger size and room count. Aschieri, an architect known for his openness to a vast diversity of inspirations from Italy and abroad, adopted building types that borrowed judiciously from the rural architecture of the Italian peninsula, especially of the northern provinces, in dialogue with the original function of Garbatella as a ‘garden suburb’.[[75]](#endnote-76)

For different reasons, the buildings constructed by Cancellotti and Marconi on Lot XXIV involved a higher degree of complexity. Cancellotti’s three edifices (Nos. 6, 7, and 10) occupied the internal core of the plot, arranged around a central fountain. In terms of their external appearance, these were the buildings most closely related to the evolving ‘modern’ design for public housing, featuring clear volumes, simple articulation, and an unashamedly minimal external design.[[76]](#endnote-77) Marconi, on the other hand, faced a different set of challenges that had to do with the position of his building at the northernmost corner section of the plot. The result was distinguished, first, by its distribution in a Y shape and, second, by the more traditional decorative features of the three facades, making this building (along with the ones designed by Marchi and Vietti) a transitional design between the ICP’s earlier experiments with public housing in Garbatella and the more rational, internationally-inspired designs offered by de Renzi and Cancellotti as part of the same project.

In the afternoon of 13 September 1929, second day of the IFHTP congress, delegates visited Garbatella as part of a tour of housing schemes in Rome.[[77]](#endnote-78) Predictably it was the ‘model houses’ of Lot XXIV and the Luzzatti hostels that attracted the lion share of interest by the international and national visitors. International reaction was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, generating effusive praise for their constructive quality, amenities, and overall design sensibility. Effusive praise made its way to the rest of the proceedings of the conference before travelling with the delegates and gaining further exposure in international journals and other publications. There was a sense of genuine bewilderment as to how a country so peripheral - up to that point - to the architectural debates had managed to summon so much creative energy and project itself so confidently to the forefront of housing and urban planning innovation. The balance between rationality of construction and judicious use of external design to avoid the kind of monotony associated with many modern public housing schemes received the most favourable mention among the delegates. While the more traditional decorative approach evident in the buildings of Lot XXIV was not to every delegate’s taste (and indeed had been criticized in other housing schemes of Rome that followed the traditional *barocchetto* canon of the early 1920s), the mediation between modernity and regional tradition was widely welcomed as a possible alternative to the modern machine aesthetics.[[78]](#endnote-79) Since similar questions had provoked an animated discussion and had divided delegates a year earlier at the Paris IFHTP congress, the showcasing of Lot XXIV was intended by the ICP as a belated, yet convincing and above all *practised* response – a thoughtful ‘third way’ between the modern movement’s experiments with standardisation and the often sub-optimal rational and hygienic norms of traditional architecture.

**C****onclusions: an alternative future for the ‘minimum dwelling’?**

Barely a month after the closing of the IFHTP congress, the results of the ICP competition for the houses of Lot XXIV were announced. The judging committee (presided by Marcello Piacentini and with the participation of Calza Bini, Testa, the ICP’s Secretary Innocenzo Costantini, and the civil engineer Guido Vitali) graded the five architects and their construction partners (Marconi’s building was not involved in the competition and at any rate was well over-budget) according to both design and execution, with individual marks given for materials used, system and quality of construction, as well as artistic contribution and aesthetic value. The partnership headed by Mario de Renzi came first, followed closely by the Cancellotti team and with the Aschieri partnership coming third.[[79]](#endnote-80) In accordance with the conditions of the competition, the ICP purchased the buildings at the agreed maximum cost of L8,000 per room. The overall cost of the project, including land fees and prizes awarded by the competition, came at just below L2.5m.

In spite of the high expectations invested in the project, however, the ICP’s experiment with a distinct type of rapid, low-cost but also high-quality housing in Lot XXIV was not repeated elsewhere, let alone on a larger scale as the original intention was. With the CIAM congress on ‘minimum housing’ opening a month after the IFHTP Rome event, the baton of housing innovation passed on to a different group of international architects with decidedly functionalist construction and design ideas. Even for the ICP itself, the 1928-29 period represented the peak of its creative parabola. Shortly after the 1929 congress, the Institute was forced to abandon its experiment with the special ‘hostels’ and then converted most of their temporary accommodation into permanent dwellings. Elsewhere in Rome, the 1930s brought a noticeable higher degree of standardisation, density, and functional simplification of design, as evidenced in the large ‘intensive’ projects of Donna Olimpia and Val Melaina executed in 1930-31.[[80]](#endnote-81) Later in the 1930s, *case rapide* and *case minime* came to represent the opposite of what the ICP had sought to achieve with the Lot XXIV - a race to cut production costs and increase output by opting for temporary or smaller or minimally designed housing units organised in ever-denser configurations.[[81]](#endnote-82)

In the 1930s, the question of the ‘minimum dwelling’ developed in the theoretical direction of the functional, scientifically-determined *Existenzminimum* charted at the 1929 CIAM congress in Frankfurt, increasingly overshadowing the earlier IFHTP paradigm of ‘housing for the very poor’. In his exhaustive theoretical study of this new housing ideology, the Czech modernist architect and leading member of CIAM Karel Teige dismissed altogether the Italian contribution to modern architecture as a whole and to the international register of modern housing solutions. While Teige did not reference at all the experiments carried out by the ICP in the 1920s, deeming them as alien to the rationalist canon of architecture that he and CIAM considered a sine qua non for the minimum dwelling, he had scathing words for the Italian rationalists as well, noting only six of their numerous housing designs had left the status of paper architecture until the early 1930s.[[82]](#endnote-83) Even the famous fifth Milan Triennale (1933) that was dedicated to the question of housing featured only one *casa minima* (designed by the young Osvaldo Borsani together with Alessandro Cairoli and G B Varisco for a family of three), which constituted a theoretical elaboration of the form and proof of concept rather than a practical blueprint for scaleable execution for the future.[[83]](#endnote-84) Commenting on the quality of the exhibited at the fifth Triennale, the secretary of CIAM Sigfried Giedion noted that “the housing question for the middle and lower classes is not yet resolved in Italy”, lacking in concrete realisations and confined to niche experimental - but not well-defined - theoretical explorations.[[84]](#endnote-85) Such a judgement on the progress of rationalism in Italy – in particular, the mismatch between ambition and realisation, theoretical elaboration and practical execution, ideas and actual construction - may have been to an extent justified in the early 1930s. Yet it certainly brushed aside a series of innovative and elaborate studies on functional housing in general and the *casa minima* in particular carried out by (mostly Milanese) architects such as Giovanni Broglio, Enrico Griffini, Piero Bottoni, and Giuseppe Pagano.[[85]](#endnote-86)

Albeit never officially labelled *case minime*, the buildings of Garbatella’s Lot XXIV represented an early alternative programmatic declaration in favour of the ‘minimum dwelling’ – and an alternative future for modern, affordable housing as a whole that never was. That this project went from idea to completion in less than seven months, within budget, was a spectacular achievement, especially when viewed in the light of Teige’s and Giedion’s subsequent critiques of modern Italian ‘paper’ architecture. That it originated and took place in Rome - a place so strikingly misaligned with the conventional genealogies of modernism in interwar Italian architecture – as early as 1929 further underlines the need for its reappraisal as a further significant indicator of Italy’s far-from-parochial role and input in international architectural debates during the second half of the 1920s. The model houses of Garbatella did not involve a race towards miniaturisation or a scientific exercise in machine standardisation. Instead they functioned as a tangible proof of concept for another viable path to the theoretical pursuit of what *Existenzminimum* really was meant to be at the point of its theoretical inception – a sustainable solution to the housing crisis that was rational, economical, and efficient while also remaining ‘rooted’ in its particular natural, ambiental, and cultural environment. Echoing a similar sentiment, Broglio (who was instrumental in bringing the follow-up exhibition on ‘minimum dwelling’ from the 1929 CIAM conference to Milan in 1931[[86]](#endnote-87)) argued that the future direction of an architectural programme for ‘minimum dwelling’ in Italy lay at a fruitful intersection of rationalism with distinct elements abstracted from the country’s rich chest of architectural and decorative traditions.[[87]](#endnote-88) As the history of the modern movement became increasingly aligned with the ever-more inflexible in ideological terms theoretical pursuits of CIAM,[[88]](#endnote-89) and as the IFHTP’s influence declined notably in the 1930s,[[89]](#endnote-90) the ‘model houses’ of Lot XXIV were relegated in historiographical terms to the status of an isolated, idiosyncratic, rather regressive, and largely ignored experiment; a status that does very little justice to their ambitious, innovative yet thoughtful mediation between programmatic positions about modernism and tradition that were deemed at the time - and continued for a long time to be treated as - irreconcilable.

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40. Cristina Bergo, “La casa ultrapopolare: dall’imitazione della casa borghese al razionalismo,” in *La casa Popolare in Lombardia, 1903-*2003, ed. Raffaele Pugliese (Milan: Edizioni Unicopli, 2005), 72-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Dario Barbieri, M. Crosland Seebrooke, “The Urban Problems of Modern Rome,” *Town Planning Review* 10, no. 3 (1923): 145–70. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Regio decreto-Legge n.1548: “Provvedimenti per le nuove costruzioni”, 30 August 1925 in *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d’Italia*, No. 210 (September 10, 1925), 3827-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. Decreto Luogotenenziale n.1857: “che stabilisce le caratteristiche delle case popolari ed economiche”, *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d’Italia*, No. 251 (October 20, 1919); cf. Broglio, *Casa Minima*, 3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Archive of the Istituto Case Popolari in Rome (henceforward ICP-ATER), Allegati 1928 II: Innocenzo Costantini, “Appunti sull’opera svolta dall’avvento del Regime,” 20 December 1928. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Kallis, “Rome’s singular path,” 279-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
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47. Broglio, *Casa Minima*, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Franchi and Chiumeo, *Urbanistica a Milano*, 193-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. AACB, Folder 5: “I vari tipi di alloggi”, 4. On the ‘moral’ mission of the ICP see Innocenzo Costantini, “Le nuove costruzioni dell'Istituto per le case popolari in Roma. La borgata giardino ‘Garbatella’,” *Architettura e Arti Decorative* 3 (1922): 132-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. AACB, Folder 5: Ministero dell’Economia Nazionale, “Per la costruzione di case popolari, rapide ed economiche,” Rome 1926. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. Giuseppe Samonà, *La Casa Popolare degli Anni ’30* (Venice: Marsilio, 1973), 37-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
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54. ICP-ATER, Verbali, Session of 6 March 1925, 14, 134-5; ICP, *La borgata giardino Garbatella e il nuovo quartiere per i baraccati* (Rome: ICP, 1925). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
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62. Villani, *Borgate*, 14-15, 30-2, 46-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
63. ICP-ATER, Allegati 1929, XVIII, Session 5 September 1929: Calza Bini to Bastianini, 24 August 1929. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
64. ICP-ATER, Allegati 1929, XVIII: “Bando di Concorso: Lotto XXIV Garbatella,” 29 March 1929. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
65. ICP-ATER, Verbali, Session of 6.4.1929 and Allegati, 1929/xviii: “Concorso per la costruzione di casette-tipo nel Lotto 24 della borgata-giardino Garbatella”; Riboldazzi, *Un’altra modernità*, 109-24; Francesca Romana Stabile, *Regionalismo a Roma. Tipi e linguaggi: il caso Garbatella* (Rome: Dedalo, 2001), 197-201\*. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
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