The study of change, in both the descriptive and the normative senses (Frank, 1985), has always been an important tool of scientific research. The positivistic experimental type of scientific paradigm has favoured a view of change as a sequence of discrete events to which the principle of antecedent-consequent causation is applicable (Altman, 1988). The objective is that of identifying a cause capable of "explaining" the difference between two successive states. The constancy bias implicit in this view of change (Proshansky et al., 1983) has been challenged in the environment and behaviour field by alternative approaches proposing intrinsically dynamic units of holistic analysis (Altman et al., 1987).

The key role of the temporal dimension is the basic assumption of studies grounded on the biographical method (Giuliani and Barbo, 1991). Emphasising the continuity of the person over his/her life span, the biography interpret the change as a process which has an internal raison d'être. In the following pages, we shall endeavour to apply the concept of biography to a place - the yard of a residential unit on the outskirts of Rome. The paper suggests that the meaning of the garden as part of the home (Sime, 1991) is not restricted to private home gardens but can extend to different outdoor spaces provided that people can play an active role in transforming and care for it. The study is based on the observation of the behaviour of the inhabitants and on semi-structured interviews with members of different ages of 20 households that moved in the residential unit at various times from construction up to last year.

The history

The year is 1948. Italy has just emerged from a war that has left the country in a disastrous economic state. While sharply felt all over, the problem of housing is aggravated in Rome by the wartime destruction and by the immigration of people leaving the country to seek work in the city. The apartments in the eight buildings making up the residential unit built by the I.A.C.P. (body responsible for low-income public housing) are assigned to tenants even before the work of urbanisation is finished.

The residential unit is situated on the extreme outskirts of Rome (the Tufello neighbourhood) and is practically isolated from the rest of the city. The area is still surrounded by fields and only connected by a single bus line to another peripheral district. No finishing work has been carried out on the buildings (eight five-storey apartment buildings with a terrace roof): the windows on the stairs have no frames and the buildings have no front door. The area in the middle of the residential unit is a stretch of earth with gravel paths. The apartments themselves (three on each floor) consist of little more than the bare walls. When the first tenants arrive, the water supply has still to be connected and electricity arrives about a year later.

The inhabitants are generally young working-class families facing a desperate housing situation. After T.'s experience of sharing a basement with two other families, the new apartment "is like a palace". The rent is also very low and, above all, there is some guarantee of stability.

The apartments (see Fig. 1) are not very big for what are generally quite large sized families (up to nine members per household). The rooms are normally used only for sleeping purposes and simply furnished with beds and wardrobe. The children play in the hall or in the yard. The regulations, whose observance is strictly enforced by the door-keeper, prohibit adults from using the yard, which is thus reserved for the numerous children, who can play there for three hours in the morning and another three in the afternoon. This situation remains more or less the same for about ten years. Some modification takes place inside the dwellings as regards furnishing: one of the two rooms (usually the biggest one) is gradually transformed into a dining room while continuing to serve as a bedroom at night by means of adjustable furniture and di-
van beds. The families that settle here from the 1960s on tend from the outset to furnish one of the two rooms as a living-room, whose function as a bedroom is concealed during the day.

Fig. 1 - Floor plan of the buildings

Halfway through the 1970s, the post of doorkeeper is abolished and adults also begin to use the yard. Women with children go there during the day; men and women chat there in the evening and communal dinners are sometimes organised. The I.A.C.P. has the paths paved over and low walls built to mark off the grassy areas. The inhabitants organise themselves to finance improvements: windows are fitted on the stairs and each building equipped with a front door. Refurbishing also takes place inside the apartments: kitchens and bathrooms are often tiled and the sanitary fittings replaced. New ties are created among the inhabitants at the meetings held to discuss the renovation work.

Fig. 2 - The residential unit

The city has expanded and the district is no longer so isolated. The I.A.C.P. loses interest both in carrying out maintenance and in exercising control over the occupation of the apartments, which come to be treated as the private property of the tenants or of their heirs, who sell their rights of tenancy through middle-men. From the mid 1960s on, the tenants who arrive are also people who have to some extent decided to live in the area, not just families on the waiting list for public housing.
In 1970 the inhabitants of one building decide to make the adjacent portion of the yard into a garden: while there are no longer so many children, there are more elderly people ready to take care of the plants. Some of the entrances to the unit are closed and outsiders children are refused admittance to the yard. In the space of a few years, other buildings follow the example set by the first and most of the yard is now taken up by flower beds and plants, with only two open stretches left for the children (see Fig. 2). As regards the inside of the apartments, renovation of the bathroom is considered the most urgent priority, for those who have not already done so, followed by combining the kitchen and hall to make a living-room with kitchenette.

**Discussion**

Why have we chosen to illustrate this collective residential history by focusing on the yard?

The yard makes it possible to capture the general structure of the change in relations with the residential environment above and beyond individual peculiarities. The history of the yard may be seen as a unified synthesis of psychological processes, of changes in the physical layout of the residential space, and of social modification. The changes in form, function and meaning taking place in the yard in the space of one generation appear to provide a schematic representation of the meeting between the socio-economic transformations of the historical period and the evolution in the inhabitants' dwelling needs over the course of their lives.

While the inhabitants of the unit constitute a set of various age groups at every stage in its history, the leading role appears to be taken by different age groups in different periods. If we consider solely the families in our sample that represent the original nucleus of tenants (i.e. those who arrived in the first 15 years), at the moment of their arrival pre-teenage children account for practically half the residential population. The children are the only ones to make use of the yard. Though nothing more than a dusty, empty space, the yard is capable of satisfying a vital need for movement and play that cannot be met inside the crowded apartments. The interior furnishing of the apartments is also designed to satisfy primary dwelling needs: sleeping, eating and hygienic functions.

Over the years the population ages and greater economic well-being makes it possible to improve the dwelling situation. Some families leave; others modify their existing conditions. The improvement of the residential environment involves two basic areas: hygienic quality and appearance. Greater cleanliness and the elimination of dust are the reasons most often given to explain the modifications of the yard (paving over the paths and then putting in plants). In addition, it "looks nicer", it is a symbol of the "love for the natural world" and it reflects the "care for the home of the inhabitants". While brought about mainly by the elderly residents, the changes meet the aesthetic approval of the others too, though some of the younger people, especially mothers with small children, regard it as a functional step backwards in that too much space is taken away from the children. The children themselves complain: "The old people shout at us and there's no space to play football or ride a bike."

Similarly, the work carried out inside the apartments focuses generally on the hygienic quality and appearance of the kitchen and bathroom facilities, where tiling takes place, and on furnishing one room so that it can be used by the children during the day and as a reasonably decent setting for entertaining guests.

This active involvement in the transformation of the dwelling space appears as cause and effect in a process of appropriation of and affective attachment to the environment. As regards the yard, the development of territorial sentiment is highlighted by its closure to outsiders, i.e. the other neighbourhood children who used to play there. Just as one of the qualities most often attributed to the home is that of a protective place where the family unite and where the door may be shut on the outside world, the yard is seen as a "safe place, protected from the dangers of the neighbourhood, from delinquency and drugs". This protective function is perhaps the most important for mothers, whereas the planting of the yard and its transformation into a garden seems have acquired a value in its own right for the older members of the community, independent of its original intention as a functional improvement.

G., a pensioner of 68 and one of the driving forces in creating the garden, says that he spends a great deal of time on it and that this gives him a great sense of satisfaction: "I can see something growing and becoming more beautiful." T. (aged 67) describes the evolution of her
own relationship with her apartment in similar terms: "At the beginning, when we had nowhere to live, this was fine as it was. Then we started to fix it up and it got to look nicer. Then you get used to having people round and you get to like your home all the more ..." The desired transformation of the kitchen into a "kitchen-cum-lounge" also appears to be related more to aesthetic and symbolic criteria than to functional.

Conclusions

In this schematic reconstruction of the life of a particular environment we have sought to shed light upon the relations between the changes in attitude towards the home taking place during the inhabitant’s lifetime and the changes brought about in the residential environment both inside and outside the dwelling itself. It is clear that the needs expressed by our small group of interviewees and the ways in which these are satisfied are bound up with the historical and socio-economic context. The appraisal of personal situation with reference to previous conditions and to real possibilities of choice is a recurrent theme. What is seen as a satisfactory point of arrival by an elderly worker used to a semi-basement apartment with communal bathroom is instead a starting point for the young office worker’s family of the 1990s.

Similarly, the evolution from emphasis on experiential value to the emergence of needs for social and functional optimisation and finally to the appraisal of symbolic and affective aspects cannot be regarded as a sequence of stages necessarily linked to particular age groups. Each stage is rather to be viewed as a phase of relations with the environment that makes the development of the subsequent phase possible.

Active involvement in modifying the environment appears to play a leading role in this development, as has already been shown with regard to attachment to the home (Giuliani, 1991).

Notes

1. The age of the interviewees ranges from 11 to 75 years. The size of the families range from one to six members. A fourth of the families have lived in the same apartment from the construction, in another fourth one member of the couple had lived here with his/her parents before marrying.

2. The flats are of two types: Type A (two per floor): 60 m² divided into two rooms of 15 and 20 m² respectively, kitchen of 20 m² with window overlooking the yard, bathroom, hall and vestibule.

Type B (one per floor): 40 m² divided into two rooms of roughly 12 m², kitchen of 6 m², bathroom, hall and vestibule. All the rooms have access to a balcony overlooking the road.

References


276