

Neither here nor there: Housing Americans in the Italian countryside

Christina Bollo¹

¹University of Oregon, Eugene, OR

ABSTRACT: This paper is an analysis of the morphology and typology of housing in the communities surrounding Aviano Air Base, Italy. The primary research question is this: Did the U.S. Military provide housing for its members that allows for familiarity and camaraderie but also fits the architectural and cultural context of the host country? What is the role of this housing in the changing context of US military involvement abroad?

This paper assesses the initial specifications and incentives for off-base housing created by a United States Air Force (USAF) program called Built to Lease (BTL) and analyzes whether the requirements may have resulted in housing that is not socially and economically sustainable. The paper compares the BTL Housing with the Housing on the Economy through a series of typological and morphological dyads, including: townhouses versus flats, carports versus underground garages, and yard versus balcony. These communities illustrate key differences between what BTL required and what the Italian market provides.

The results of the study show stark discrepancies between the housing created by Built to Lease and Housing on the Economy. The analysis reveals that since the BTL housing was released onto the private market, neither Italians nor Americans are attracted to it; as a result, it appears to suffer an extreme vacancy problem, as evidenced by the fieldwork. The Italian developers have put several of the communities up for sale, and it is unclear what the future will hold for these oddly inappropriate communities, neither American enough for the Americans, nor Italian enough for the Italians.

KEYWORDS: Housing, Military, Italy imperialism, Economics

INTRODUCTION

In 2000 there was a deficit of available housing near Aviano Air Base; in response the USAF initiated the Built To Lease (BTL) program, and Italian developers created 530 new dwellings in Northeastern Italy. For 10 years these dwellings were leased by the USAF for the exclusive use of its service members, essentially functioning as on-base housing, off_base. In 2010 the leases expired and the BTL housing became unrestricted, still available to USAF families but not reserved exclusively for their use. The BTL housing competes with housing in the community offered by private landlords that meets Air Force standards. The spatial and architectural attributes of housing created through BTL are very different from the typical housing in the region.

This research was initiated to answer the question, what is happening to these dwellings now? Given the fact that the program ended, was it economically and environmentally sustainable to build them in the first place? How did and does the program influence housing in these communities?

There is very little interaction between USAF families and their Italian neighbors outside of the shared housing economy. It is vital that this relationship, with serves as an ambassadorship for the US, take cultural appropriateness into consideration. To an Italian, the wastefulness of vacant, relatively new housing must seem astounding. The U.S. government houses military personnel in locations throughout the world, and if we do not provide a culturally appropriate built environment we risk endangering the relationships we rely on with the host countries.

1.0 Research methods

The methods for data collection included an inventory of existing housing; direct observation of Built to Lease communities; direct observation of advertised and approved Housing on the Economy; interviews with key stakeholders at Aviano Air Base; and archival research in Italian newspapers and social media. The methods relied on triangulation of Italian and American sources and also relied on the primary investigator's previous experience researching on-base military housing in the United States. The analysis method employed was Grounded Theory, which enabled a thorough understanding of a diverse set of quantitative and qualitative data. The analysis was conducted through constantly comparative memo writing.

1.1. Housing classifieds inventory

The research began with an inventory of the housing available through three websites for finding housing near Aviano Air Base. The first, AHRN.com is common to all US bases worldwide. It is easy to search by city

and had the largest total number of ads. AvianoHousing.com was created specifically for Aviano's unique housing conditions by housing management. Landlords initiate listings, but housing is verified and rent is set before posting. Though the mapping function works better than that of AHRN.com, a viewer cannot search AvianoHousing.com by location, which seems a lost opportunity for a system that purports to prioritize the location (and commuting distance) of the housing. Avianoclassifieds.com has posts from real estate agents and landlords, most of whom are cross-listing with either AHRN or avianohousing.com. Interestingly, the site also has advertisements for housing that USAF families are leaving: "I am the current tenant. The landlord is truly great." There is a readily apparent mix of the desire to help incoming families and the desire to help someone who has been a good landlord.

These three housing resources are easily accessed and analyzed, before and during the fieldwork phase. They helped planning the fieldwork trips and understanding the range of housing available, both the BTL stock and conventional housing on the economy.

1.2. Interviews with stakeholders

Mike Toriello, the deputy commander for the US Air Force side of the base, was an essential informant of the history of the housing. Tammy Hardt, the director of Housing, gave a nuanced history of the BTL process. She was on her second tour at Aviano; the first had been 12 years before when BTL was initiated. The interviews were helpful not only for the information they elicited verbally but also because Hardt made printed copies of the plans for each of the BTL communities available for analysis

1.3. Direct observation

Housing on the Economy (HOTE) was visited and evaluated in the two largest towns, Pordenone and Sacile, as well as smaller towns, including Aviano, Roveredo and Ceolini. The research was scheduled for early May because families are just beginning to learn about potential reassignments but have not yet moved. This enabled the vacancy observations to be more reliable than they would be once the moving had begun. The direct observation of the Built to Lease (BTL) housing took place during the same time period.

"Evidence of Americans" (Figure 1) was collected at each study site. These observations included U.S. flags; American beer cans (which can only be purchased on base at the Exchange); square license plates with a ZA prefix; Rubbermaid, free-standing storage containers; Children's toys left in the yard (not an Italian practice); kid-sized basketball hoops; window screens; signs in English; coolers, especially left out on a balcony; and "Beware of Dog" signs attached to fences.

Evidence of Italians (Figure 2) included yards with a large number of potted plants or established gardens; Italian flags (out in full force in the month of May, though never seen at a house with American tenants); drying racks for clothes (all housing approved by Aviano Housing has clothes dryers installed). There was some evidence of other European residents, in particular Slovakian and Croatian license plate tags and flags of those countries.



Figure 1: Evidence of American residents in former BTL Housing and HOTE. Source: (Author 2014)



Figure 2: Evidence of Italian residents in former BTL Housing and typical housing. Source: (Author 2014)

The data collection methods sketches and photographs for follow-up study and analysis. All observation took place on foot in order to draw less attention to the researcher.

1.4. Archival research

Archival data collection included USAF newspapers and reports about the BTL program, including the Request for Proposals (RFP) that was collected during the interview process. Facebook proved valuable for understanding the points of view of the spouses of service members stationed at Aviano. Archives of Italian newspapers from the region showed the local impressions of Aviano Air Base generally and of the BTL program in particular.

2.0 BACKGROUND ON HOUSING AT AVIANO

2.1. The expanding U.S. presence in Europe

The history of the Aviano housing program must be viewed through the lens of a complicated cultural and political context. Approximately 4,000 U.S. service members are stationed at Aviano Air Base in Northeastern Italy. Technically, Aviano is an Italian air base that hosts NATO forces, most of whom are members of the United States Air Force (USAF). In the 1990s, as the U.S. military expanded its presence in Europe, Aviano expanded significantly, and the U.S. made large investments in the base itself, including building a Base Exchange and Commissary, Temporary Lodging, and dorms for single unaccompanied airmen, all of which were completed in 2000.

Since the USAF has had a presence at Aviano Air Base, all single senior enlisted airmen and officers and all accompanied service members lived in housing owned by Italians in the towns surrounding Aviano. During the expansion, they faced a housing crisis due to the increased demand for housing coupled with a static supply. To solve the supply problem, Aviano leadership initiated the Build To Lease (BTL) housing to quickly increase the amount of housing available. In 1998, the Air Force solicited proposals from Italian developers to supply 530 new dwelling units by 2000. The developers purchased the land and were guaranteed 10-year leases with the USAF (which they used to finance the housing). The USAF also paid to maintain the units during this period, employing Italian contractors.

Thus, for 10 years, BTL dwellings were for the exclusive use of USAF service members and their families, essentially functioning as on base housing, off base. Starting in 2010, the leases expired and the BTL housing became unrestricted, available to USAF families, but not reserved exclusively for their use. Therefore, the BTL housing now competes with housing offered by private local landlords that meets Air Force standards.

2.2. Economics of housing for military families

It is important to understand the economics of housing for military families, and to understand how the typical situation differs from both the previous and current situation for service members at Aviano Air Base. When service members are stationed in the United States, they receive a Base Allowance for Housing (BAH) on top of their salaries that is tied to rank, family size and other factors. They can choose to live on base and forfeit their BAH or live off base and use their BAH for rent, keeping whatever remains for other expenses. When service members are stationed abroad, they receive an Overseas Housing Allowance (OHA) which, again, is tied to rank and family size; but unlike the BAH, the OHA covers the rent and the difference stays with the US Military. Essentially, the actual rent is irrelevant to the family as long as the rent is below the family's OHA.

Table 1: Aviano Overseas Housing Allowance for 2014. Source: (USAF 2014)

E1 with dependents	1006 Euro
O1 without dependents	1035 Euro
O1 with dependents	1150 Euro

The Italian developers who owned the BTL housing during the ten-year lease period received the full OHA for each apartment, for every month of the year. These guaranteed rent payments were much higher than the market rents in the area at the time.

Simultaneous to the end of BTL, Aviano instituted a system of maximum rents based on objective housing criteria. The evaluation process for determining rent for each housing unit is very rigorous, based on formulas related to the size of the dwelling, attributes of certain amenities (such as outdoor space and parking), age and condition of unit, and location. Each locality has a factor (Euro/m²) that is used to determine the rent and there are three categories: the highest potential rents are in the historic centers of Sacile and Pordenone; the second highest in the towns within a 15 minute drive of the base; and the third highest in the towns farther afield.

The system allows larger dwellings to be rewarded with a larger maximum rent, though there are diminishing returns. For a dwelling of less than 50 m² the area is multiplied by 1.35; for a dwelling between 50 and 70 m² the factor is 1.25 and for dwellings larger than 70 m² the factor is 1.00. A private garage has its area multiplied by .50, while a carport or underground garage is only .20. The fact that a carport, which is quite inexpensive to construct, is “worth” the same as an underground garage, which is expensive to construct, is astounding.

The relationship between housing types and their relationship to maximum rent is also not linear. There are two categories: 1) single units, duplexes, and townhouses; and 2) apartments. Dwellings between 16 and 29 years old have the same factor for a given locality, regardless of the building type; but dwellings that are 30 years or older can rent for more if apartments, than the first category; and dwellings that are less than 15 years old (either restored or new construction) can rent for more if they are in the first category than apartments. This system prevents rent manipulation with vulnerable tenants, but it also has the potential to affect the form of housing in these Italian communities.

2.3. The ramifications of the Aviano housing situation

According to Mike Toriello, former deputy commander of Aviano Air Base, Aviano is one of the most difficult assignments for service members because of the stresses of living off base. The BTL program was comforting to some of the younger enlisted airmen and their families because the BTL communities were very similar to on-base housing. According to Tammy Hardt, service members liked living in BTL housing because of the convenience and ease, much like living on base. Aviano Air Base has the highest rate of early return for spouses of any base abroad. When a spouse qualifies for an early return to the US based on hardship, the Air Force pays for the spouse's move. If there is no hardship, the family pays for the move. (The AF does not keep track of those moves.). The Aviano Housing website warns, “Housing in Italy is definitely different than in the United States. The Housing Office continues to work with local landlords to include typical American-style amenities such as air conditioning, light fixtures, adequate kitchen counter and storage space, off-street parking, and window screens.” For service members and their families, housing plays a huge role in their abilities to perform their jobs well.

3.0 Architectural Comparison of Build to Lease with Housing on the Economy

3.1. Built to lease housing

To meet the needs of the families, the Air Force requested communities of 25 to 75 units, with 15% two bedroom units, 55% three bedroom units, and 30% four bedroom units. All buildings were required to be two stories, and the sites were required to be within a 35 minute drive of Aviano Air Base, with preference given to proposals within a 25-minute drive and a higher scoring given to those within a 15-minute drive (Figure 3). The unit and community designs were deemed the most important criterion, with 40% of the score in this area. Unit design was divided into three categories: functional arrangement, indoor/outdoor integration, and exterior appearance. Interior design was formally prioritized over exterior design.

There are many differences between what the RFP required and the conventional housing stock contained. In the interior of the unit, typical American appliances were expected: dishwashers, washing machines, dryers, and air conditioning. A significant amount of interior storage was required, including a closet in every bedroom, a six m² bulk storage room, pantries, linen closets, and attic storage with pull-down ladders. On the exterior, two parking spaces were required with at least one covered as a carport or garage. At the site level, visitor parking was required as were recreational areas, including a playground (Figure 4), basketball court and jogging trails.



Figure 3: Commuting Map. Source: (USAF 2014)



Figure 4: Typical BTL Playground. Source: (Author 2014)

Through the RFP, the Air Force was exacting a form of cultural imperialism. This was not on-base housing, within the confines of their domain. This housing was designed very specifically and intentionally for 530 American families who were living within Italian towns. Because of the size of the buildings and the lack of density, big parcels were chosen by the developers on the outskirts of existing towns, separate from them architecturally and separate in terms of the lives of the residents. Despite being built by Italians, the architectural character was so different from the existing fabric that the new communities were doomed to stand apart.

3.2. The architectural character of built to lease housing

As a visitor, the architectural language of the BTL sites became obvious: carports, pedestrian paths (jogging trails, in the RFP), and playgrounds were all signs of BTL communities. Italians do not generally build playgrounds, though some of the newer Italian communities have playgrounds, presumably to attract Americans. Basketball hoops of all sizes and states of repair are a clear visual cue of BTL involvement. Whether this was meant to be cute or ironic, BTL townhouses often had typical American rural mailboxes, with the requisite red pop-up flag, quite a strange site in a town serviced by the Posta Italia.

Built to Lease housing follows a consistent typology of two-story townhouses, generally in buildings of six units. The communities in San Giovanni, Aviano and Roveredo deviate from this pattern with a mix of duplexes connected by carports and a single-family dwelling at the end of each row. The site at San Quirino, is the only site to include townhouses and flats (Table 2). The BTL developers maximized the competitive RFP requirements and minimized their upfront costs by choosing carports for the parking at every development except Valleoncello and San Quirino. Many of the communities had a vast sea of unused surface parking for visitors, as required by the RFP. The more successful projects, including San Giovanni, had small surface parking areas at the end of each row of townhouses that could be utilized as informal play spaces for kids.



Figure 5: Typical BTL Housing Ceolini (Author 2014)



Figure 6: BTL Housing Via Oberdan. (Author 2014)

Table 2: Built to Lease Housing: (Author 2014)

Address	Town	Type	# Units	# Occupied	% Occupied	Condition	Outdoor Space	Parking	Evidence of Americans	Evidence of Italians
Via Valleoncello	Vallenoncello	Town-houses	41	8	20%	5	Front yard, Back yard	Under-ground	Y	Y
Via Kennedy	San Foca	Town-houses	26	13	50%	6	Balconies; Yards	Carport	Y	Y
Via Vajont	Maniago in Fanna	Town-houses	44	22	50%	7	Balconies; Yards	Carport	N	Y
Via Falcone	Maniago in Campagna	Town-houses	38	16	42%	6	Balconies; Yards	Carport	N	N
Vicolo dei Cuoi	Villadolt	Town-houses	31	10	32%	7	Balconies; Yards	Carport	N	Y
Via Passolini	Ceolini	Town-houses	42	14	33%	8	Balconies; Yards	Carport	N	Y
Vicolo Sapri	Ceolini	Town-houses	20	3	15%	6	Balconies; Yards	Carport	Y	Y
Via Rivata	Vigonovo	Town-houses	29	9	31%	7	Yards	Carport	Y	N
Via Toreal	Vigonovo	Town-houses	43	18	42%	7	Yards	Carport	Y	Y
Via Latisana	San Giovanni del Tiempo	Duplex	25	15	60%	8	Yards	Carport	Y	Y
Via Oberdan	Aviano	Duplex	16	3	19%	5	Yards	Carport	Y	N
Via King	Roveredo	Town-houses	58	24	41%	5	Yards	Carport	Y	N
Via Franco	San Quirino	Town-houses, Flats	23	10	43%	8	Yards	Under-ground	Y	N

3.3. The architectural character of housing on the economy

The sample of Housing on the Economy analyzed in the towns near Aviano Air Base varied from single-family houses to three-bedroom flats in seven-story apartment buildings, and many housing types in between those extremes. With very few exceptions, the housing offered was extremely well maintained and had ample outdoor space, usually in the form of large balconies.

Both Italian and American tenants living on the economy showed evidence of heavy balcony use, for recreation and display. There were ubiquitous split systems for air conditioning on the side of almost all dwellings that appeared more than 5 years old. Newer buildings and single-family houses had compressors on the roof or on the ground. The apartment buildings that were taller than 4 stories appeared to have elevators, but the smaller buildings did not.

Newer housing on the economy that is advertised to Americans seems designed to maximize the rent and to maximize the appeal to the target demographic. Large storage closets are present inside and outside the dwelling. Garages are private rather than common and underground. One landlord even showed an illicit hose bib inside a private garage to wash the car, an activity that is prohibited in Northern Italy. At one new complex in Sacile there is an American-style playground (Figure 8).



Figure 7: Typical HOTE



Figure 8: New Housing w/ evidence of Americans and Italians. (Author 2014)

3.4. Endemic vacancy at built to lease housing

The starkest commonality amongst the BTL communities was the obvious vacancy: 62% vacancy average across sites. Because the research was timed to occur before families began to move to new assignments, the results of the vacancy analysis are reliable, though there could be two extenuating circumstances: Valleoncello was being rehabilitated because of stucco problems and Vigonovo was publicly for sale.

The vacancy followed a clear pattern from site to site: the end units in a row of six townhouses were generally occupied and rarely were the middle units occupied (Figure 9). This pattern held from site to site and was not affected by dwelling size as two-, three- or four-bedroom units changed position within a row. At Villadolt, only one middle unit of 27 was occupied and all but one end unit of 14 were occupied. At Ceolini, all of the end units were occupied and none of the middle units were. This could result from acoustic privacy or from a desire for more side yard area, which the middle units lacked.



Figure 9: Typical Vacancy Condition, Villadolt. (Author 2014)

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that since the BTL housing was released onto the private market, neither Italians nor Americans are attracted to it; as a result it appears to suffer an extreme vacancy problem, as evidenced by the fieldwork. According to Hardt, now that the housing crisis has eased, Americans are not choosing to live in former BTL units because they want bigger apartments. The ease and camaraderie of the previous arrangement has disappeared as service members move away from the BTL units. Through social media, new families are actively discouraged from choosing the BTL units by other American families.

BTL...was Aviano's answer to not having base housing when the population of military increased dramatically about 12 years ago. Little concrete neighborhoods were built in the surrounding towns with the purpose of renting to military only. They were put back on the general market 2 years ago. They suck. We lived in one for almost two years before moving out into a privately owned home. The layout is poor, the maintenance was shabby, and the isolation away from Italy life wasn't great either.

The greatest travesty may be if the housing, vacant and unloved, is torn down. This would go against the USAF goals on sustainability and resource conservation, as well as be antithetical to Italian ideals of housing preservation.

Future research could closely examine the housing on the economy and the BTL housing using a case study method. Triangulation of the American stakeholder interviews with Italian stakeholder interviews, in particular the developers could shed light on the tradeoffs that were necessary in constructing the BTL housing. A future study could also ask: Given the results of BTL, what can be done now?

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