

**“Topics: investigation of the hybrid field of practice of mass housing between research, legislation, architecture, urban planning, social sustainability, ecology, and political activism”  
by Carmen Popescu**

These remarks which are closing our meeting do not attempt to provide conclusions for the study of the ‘Mass-housing East and West’. Not only it would be presumptuous from my part to try to cover here such a vast – geographically as disciplinarily – area of study, but, at the same time, would it go beyond the scope of this conference, which did not aspire to provide such an exhaustive overview. Here we cover only partially the former Eastern bloc context– we are missing case studies from Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Albania and especially from the rich background of former Yugoslavia – while the mass-housing in the Western context was limited to very few examples, meant to enable an incipient comparison East/ West. The comparative perspective was rather evoked than thoroughly explored, thus opening the path for a logical continuation of our common efforts.

What we have intended with this conference was, on the first hand, to reopen an issue which engendered more and more interest lately. The quality of the papers presented here reflected as a matter of fact a certain maturity of the approach, proving the importance gained by the topic in the architectural scholarship. On the other hand, we were interested in evaluating a set of significant matters pertaining to this building type and to its multiple implications, in terms of economy, society and, of course, politics. At the same time, aside from the scholarly aims of the conference, we wished to test the possibility of launching a platform of collaborative work on the topic, able to develop further common projects.

For these reasons, I think that now, at the end

of this meeting, I will simply summarise the major questions shared by the presented papers. To the already rich material, I would like to add some new issues that are relevant to our topic, with the hope that they will stir the debates afterwards.

The structure of the conference – case studies in the morning and on-going projects in the afternoon – reflects our plan, as Miles already pointed out in his introductory speech, to focus on two specific aspects concerning mass-housing: methodology and conservation. Together, these two lines of directory allow one to grasp the specificity of the topic, both highlighting its complex nature and responding to its mass-production. Discussing methodology is seminal for apprehending the manifold (and intricate) layers of the mass-housing: the historical analysis needs to be complemented and enhanced by specific approaches responding to this multifaceted nature. At the same time, the unequaled level of production of this building type raises important questions related to its documentation, preservation and rehabilitation.

Both areas of exploration are interrelated, combining historical analysis with a prospective view on the topic, indispensable for the dilemmatic situation of mass-housing today. Documentation and inventorisation help refining – filling in the gaps – the study of the history, while scholarly research is crucial in deciding upon eventual patrimonialisation. We think that these lines of enquiry, that helped structure our conference, might as well provide an effective guidance for a further working platform.

**Mass-housing as an exemplary study topic:**

The issues of documentation, preservation, patrimonialisation discussed here appeared to go beyond the topic of mass-housing and address, at the same time, a set of questions that proved to be pivotal for the historiographical reassessment of Modernist architecture. These are mainly engendered by two factors, which are the change of scale and, related to it, a certain ‘ordinariness’.

The 2007 conference ‘Trash or Treasure’ lengthily debated the difficulty engendered by these factors in dealing with post-war mass-housing: as Miles remarked in the introduction to the proceedings (Docomomo electronic newsletter 7, October 2007), these two factors contributed not only to the post-war mass-housing unpopularity but also the difficulty of defining its place within the history of architecture. While its large scale redundancy complicated the historic research, its controversial relationship to the Vitruvian vision seems to have threatened its very status as architecture. As Stefan also noticed in his paper, if there is usually nothing to be said against the building quality of the mass-housing (let me remind that he was speaking about the British context), it is the third Vitruvian heading, that is ‘Beauty’, which is often questionable.

Meanwhile, the dilemma related to these two factors – scale and ordinariness – could be looked at as a historiographical challenge, demanding to adjust both the methodology and the comprehension of the object of study. ‘Exceptionality’, as a driving criterion in thinking architecture, is tumbled

by the complex issues related to mass-housing not only in terms of preservation (see OMA’s position at the 2010 Venice biennale), but also (and I would say mainly) in terms of theorisation and, finally, of historiography. What appear as ordinary architectural objects conceal a complex structure with multiple implications – in the political, social, societal and cultural realms – and thus demand multiple readings, if not a crossed interpretation. This is, as a matter of fact, one of the most defining characteristics of postwar mass-housing – as it was already discussed in the 2007 conference – to mingle in an inextricable connection design, production, and reception. Hence, interdisciplinarity, so often claimed in the methodological debates of the past years and purposely requested here by the research project directed by Annie and Danièle, represents but a natural approach to studying mass-housing. This requires, aside from the various competences able to address the different layers of the theme – the sociologist meeting the engineer, the economist meeting the anthropologist, etc. – the architectural historian to adopt and combine different perspectives as well.

The papers presented in the conference reflected this cross-referential approach. One of the major approaches tackled here was the study of the urban form – several speakers mentioned it, while Juliana entirely focused on it – without whom a thorough analysis of mass-housing is unthinkable. Looking at the urban form allows apprehending both the scale (a factor that raises, as we have seen, so many problems) and the various implications of these developments for the city (and not just in terms of town planning). Tech-

nology, with its different aspects (prefabrication, materials, building types, etc.), offers as well an important insight into the theme of mass-housing. It is interesting to note that this approach which is so technically oriented conceals strong political connotations, which turned technological issues into markers of the Cold War years – hence the common view, both in the West and the East, assimilating standardisation and concrete with Soviet ideology; however, a compared history could show the similarities between the two blocs, revealing the transfers as well as the chronological continuities with the former period. In the Czech case, as Kimberly showed, there was an evident continuation between the interwar preoccupations and the questions related to the post-war production. Such connections allows one to understand that prefabrication and standardisation might have been controlled by the party ideology but represented, in the same time, key issues for modernist architecture.

Several papers addressed the subject of reception, which definitely represents an important approach to the study of mass-housing. As Henrieta and Florian pointed out, but also Mart and Stefan – their remarks covering the realities of the two blocs – the criticism associated to mass-housing is to be understood both in political and aesthetical terms. It would be worth exploring to what extent political failure and crisis of modernist architecture overlapped and what the possible interactions were. As Henrieta showed, in the 1980s Slovakia the massive public critics of the concrete slab mass-housing actually voiced an underground criticism against the regime.

Finally, the inhabiting practices constituted another significant perspective analyzed by a number of the speakers. The analysis played on different scales, from the urban form – aside the social implications, the political one made surface in both blocs, as demonstrated by Florian and Mart – to the small scale of the apartment. Explored in numerous publications of cultural studies, this latter subject was less discussed in the present conference but could provide, from the architectural design point of view, an important complement to the study of the architectural object and its urban development.

To go back to the issues of reception, another aspect that was less discussed here – though mentioned by a series of papers – was the ‘success-story’ of certain housing-estates. As Florian specified, in spite of its unattractive appearance, mass-housing offered comfort which was rarely experienced before. The comfort of the private sphere was completed by the urban design of the public (open) spaces, the infrastructures and programs (providing the then ideal independent city district, as noted Henrieta), the massive presence of greenery, etc. Such examples were to be found in the entire Eastern bloc, from the USSR– with models like the famous Novye Cheryomushky in Moscow, epitomized in Shostakovich’s opera – to the satellite countries.

The success-story of a number of these housing-estates from the Socialist years survived the radical changes ensued after the fall of the Wall, or perhaps – in certain situations – was propelled by those changes. Aside from the poor condition

of many of the housing-estates of the communist period, if not the dereliction of some of them, there are slabs and towers, as well as entire districts – in Berlin, Belgrade, Bucharest, etc. – attracting new types of population. This new popularity of the socialist developments has different reasons – some are aesthetical (enthusiasts of concrete modernism), some are ideological (defenders of the original ideals of mass-housing; critics of the consumerist attitude), others are social/ societal (trend-followers, illustrating the reassessment of values). Sometimes, the housing-estates become victims of their new popularity, which brought along transformations (in terms of façade, public space, urban density and urban design, programs, etc.). Hence, the integration into the post-socialist city is not necessarily a proof of the success of the initial concept.

### **Mass-housing-today**

All these issues of appreciation and rejection raise major questions concerning the situation of mass-housing today. They address the twofold problem – economic and societal – of rehabilitation of these estates as much as they open the discussion on the predicament of patrimonialisation. How to succeed to transform a shabby neighborhood, worn out by time and human practices, not necessarily in terms of desirability but at least of decency? Vera showed the difficulty of this process, from finding pragmatic solutions and financial support to convincing local authorities and cooperating with the inhabitants. She showed, as well, that this process begins before the rehabilitation project starts: the inhabitants per-

form a series of transformations of the buildings and of the public space in order to improve the dwelling conditions (either in terms of comfort or of mere ‘beautification’), thus appropriating them in a different manner than the original modernist scheme. Once more, this modernist scheme appears as a problematic concept in the way it was perceived by the population, who associated open spaces with the refusal of individual property by the communist regime – hence the multiplication after 1989 of fences in the former courtyards of the developments – and the seriality imposed both by standardisation and a minimalist aesthetic with its restrictive ideology. In this latter respect, the project of rehabilitation of Tirana’s facades, by Edi Rama, the exiled Albanian artist who became mayor of the capital, is symptomatic. The colorfully newly painted facades of Tirana were applauded as a victory against communism but also against the uniformity of modernism.

In this context, where the natural transformation undergone by a city is enhanced, in the case of mass-housing, by the rapid pace of different rehabilitations and ‘appropriations’ affecting altogether facades, structure of the buildings and urban form, a major historiographical question rises: how to keep trace of the original schemes? Certainly, the best solution would be inventorisation, but as Miles showed in his introduction to the conference as well as some of the speakers, one should first solve the scale problem. Even a fragmentary inventorisation, which appears as the sole possibility given the large number of estates, demands first a thorough study of mass-housing. A study which would not list just the ‘exceptional’ –

here I have to disagree with Kimberly – in terms of architecture, urbanism, etc., but also the frequent types, since the ‘typical’ constitutes the large body of mass-housing. If inventorisation is problematic, patrimonialisation is more even so. The attempts experimented in different places – like, for instance, the French projects mixing local initiatives with the competences of the Regional Services of Heritage, which started as early as 1988 – reflected the limitation of the approach, both in terms of time and of covered surface. The rare operations (documentation, inventorisation) engaged in the former Eastern bloc to legitimise a further (eventual) patrimonialisation focused primarily on the exceptions – in Romania, for instance, only few housing-estates from the Stalinist period (whose Socialist-realist architecture was considered as exemplary) were proposed to integrate the list of historic monuments. Such a selection could have risky historiographical consequences, alienating the very nature of the concept of mass-housing.

It seems therefore that these issues of inventorisation, preservation, patrimonialisation remain open questions, to be debated further on, as the research would advance and the methodology would be refined.

### **Open questions for a further research**

What appears as a clear conclusion of this conference – and was presented as a working premise in Annie’s and Danièle’s project of research – is the necessity to continue a comparative history of mass-housing in East and West. Not just a parallel history, lining up facts in two separate columns,

but a crossed analysis allowing to grasp the similarities (as well as the differences), the transfers, the circulation of people and models. As Florian pointed out, there are more similarities between the two blocs than acknowledged, but meanwhile, to quote Kimberly, it is important to adjust the tools of the research (usually forged by the Western historiography to the former Eastern bloc realities. Also, it would be essential to clearly establish the exchanges between the two blocs, those originated by exceptional events – such as the 5th UIA meeting in Moscow in 1958 – but also the regular ones. The famous ‘documentation trips’, which benefited a number of Eastern architects and engineers, started to constitute in the past years a subject of research which awaits to be developed. This is the same for networking within the professional bodies (architects, engineers) from different countries, enabled both by the survival of the former interwar contacts and by the Eastern immigrants who ‘chose the liberty’.

Yet another task to be accomplished would be to establish a comprehensive bibliography, with titles concerning the two blocs. Such a list would smoothen the path towards a crossed research, even if an effective use would be reduced due to the language barriers.

I am sure that the debates to follow now will bring several suggestions, but I also hope that these will be carried on and integrated into a further project of research.