'Mass Housing: Modern Architecture and State Power - A 20th Century Epic' by Miles Glendinning (Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies, University of Edinburgh)

Modern Architecture and State Power – a 20th-Century Epic

Today, unlike yesterday's general overview lecture about mass housing and its conservation, I want to take a specifically research and publication slant, explaining key themes of the forthcoming book I'm working on with Bloomsbury Academic Press, entitled 'Mass Housing – Modern Architecture and State Power, a C20 Epic'. As the title emphasises, the book has a double focus: the modern state, and modern architecture. It tells the story of their interaction on a heroic scale, over the past century, in generating one of the most ubiquitous modern urban development patterns.

Most dwellings built in the 20th century simply perpetuated earlier patterns, including individual private houses or informal dwellings built by the inhabitants themselves. The low or middle-income housing complexes that dominate this book are quite different. They were shaped less by individual motives than by the collective interventions of the modern state, responding to urgent political and economic pressures. And their often monumental built form broke sharply from 19th century patterns, under the revolutionary influence of the architectural Modern Movement. Mass housing developments reared up in cities across the world, from Moscow to Buenos Aires, from Toronto to Melbourne, in a vast wave unleashed by the confluence of the strong modern state and modernist architecture. And for half a century, almost all commentaries on this tide of state-sponsored modernisation were agreed on one claim above everything: that this was a phenomenon of overwhelming global homogeneity, of architectural, cultural, social sameness.

This book puts forward a very different argument. It argues that modernist mass housing, far from a monochrome desert of uniformity, was a global landscape of riotously colourful variety and complexity, responding both to the diversity of the 20th century and early 21st century state, and to the countless permutations of modernist architecture.

Even the names given to mass-housing complexes vary between languages and between countries: for example the Spanish 'polígono' is a 'conjunto habitacional' or 'barrio' in most of Hispanic America, but a 'casério' in Puerto Rico. In tackling such a vast subject, this book's approach is necessarily highly focused. It does not deal, for instance, with the experience of mass housing by its inhabitants, or evaluate its 'success' or 'failure' in solving social problems, or its moral standing in general: many active housebuilding regimes were distinctly authoritarian or undemocratic in character! Its sole concern is historical, and ambitious enough at that: to provide the first-ever global overview of what was built in this vast movement, and why – emphasising its pervasive diversity. This is a historical story of potentially epic proportions, drawing on the deepest driving-forces and anxieties of society. Its paradoxical combination of historical force and diversity arguably goes back to the initial emergence of the modern, sovereign state, and the subsequent challenge posed by the disembedding forces of the capitalist urban revolution, which provoked an increasingly interventive

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stance by the state.

That growing ambition and power, in turn, spurred the emergence of distinctive institutions, functionally differentiated in typical modernist fashion, which intervened in political crises when the private market was criticised for alleged ineffectiveness, and in turn helped shape the practices of the state: in Giddens's words, 'the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and outcome of the practices that constitute those systems'. Ultimately, state-sponsored low-income housing would exemplify this duality, as both an outcome and a vehicle of expanding state power. That circular process, as I argue in the first chapter of the book, began around the turn of the C20. Interventions were usually advocated in burning, messianic humanitarian language, extolling ideals such as 'decent housing for all' or 'homes for the people', and addressing spiritual yearnings as well as material needs.

Yet the universality of this rhetoric disguised huge disparities in conditions and expectations, disparities which occasionally surfaced by chance: in 1937, for instance, Manchester housing reformer E D Simon commented on a Soviet study-visit that '90% of the families in Moscow could improve their housing conditions beyond recognition if they could have for themselves one of those houses that are being pulled down in Manchester as unfit for human habitation'.

Yet beneath all the lofty rhetoric and massive housing-need statistics there also swirled among the ruling classes urgent, existential fears of

social instability, with results that often included prioritising the housing of skilled workers rather than the 'poor', as a way of securing their loyalty. Indeed, one of the most enduring paradoxes within mass housing was the fact that, for all the talk of fighting injustice, the most effective and long-lasting housing programmes focused on somewhat better-off citizens, whereas attempts to build directly for the poorest, e.g. in the USA, often came to a premature and controversial end.

In the early 20th century the worry about instability sharpened into a fear of violent revolution, although revolutionary transformation also had positive connotations. The experience of World War I added 'total war' to this destabilising mix, and by 1945, social welfare was enshrined as an international as well as national policy goal, and the mobilising rhetoric of warfare and national emergency pervaded social policy, within planned campaigns that echoed Clausewitz's axiom that strategy 'must give an aim to the whole military action that corresponds to the goal of the war'. One the very foremost weapons in the armoury of the disciplined, 'strong state' of the 20th century was mass housing, prosecuted with military strategic organisation, trumpeted in martial slogans such as 'the war against the slums' or even 'the enemy within' - yet also shaped on the ground by tactical decision-making, formulating policy opportunistically rather than cumulatively.

During the mid-20th century, too, an equally dynamic new trans-national force, the Modern Movement of architecture and planning, was making itself felt in those areas of the built

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environment claimed by the emergent 'mass' state. This architectural ideology combined an almost Leninist scientific authoritarianism, rooted in rationalist efficiency doctrines, with the poetic, prophetic writings and designs of individualistic pioneers, interpreted by the 'priesthood' of CIAM. The Modern Movement made sweeping claims of universal applicability, yet combined these with embrace of national and local variety in place-specific interpretation.

The mass housing movement was at the centre of all these developments, and hugely intensified its driving force, at the same time as broadening its scope across the world. So my book tries – at the obvious risk of incoherence - to combine a chronological and geographical arrangement. Chronologically, it presents mass housing as an epic story, in which the first precocious initiatives in a few developed countries were followed by a general explosion of activity and energy in the post-1945 decades of reconstruction and decolonisation, and a subsequent retrenchment in the old housing heartlands. Corresponding to these three phases, part A of the book presents a coordinated narrative of the build-up period prior to 1945; the quantitatively dominant Part B reflects mass housing's vastly greater breadth of scope in those years in a geographical arrangement of chapters, covering the world's chief regions of mass housing production while stressing the particular conditions in individual nations; and part C draws the narrative together again in the more uncertain years after 1989.

It was in the period covered by Part B, with the global standing of communism hugely boosted by the USSR's wartime victories, that the geopolitical structure of social provision, including mass housing, assumed its mature form. The new framework was most famously summed up in 1952 by social critic Alfred Sauvy, echoing the French 18th-century 'Three Estates', who interpreted the developed world through a binary opposition between the 'First World' (Western capitalist) and 'Second World' (the communist bloc).

Defined by its 'otherness' in relation to these two groupings was his 'Third World' of developing and non-aligned states, a category now suddenly and hugely inflated by the postwar collapse of the European empires. The arrangement of Part B of this book reflects this well-known structure, and also highlights the geo-political subdivisions and anomalies within it, including the splits within the First and Second Worlds between 'American anti-socialist' and 'European Welfare State' approaches, and between 'Soviet' and 'Chinese' socialism.

Contrary to the later claims of top-down homogeneity, by the 1960s most states of the First and Second Worlds had developed their own, distinctive patterns of social housing production, energised by strong state control and new collective values: in the Second World these focused on communist social engineering and in the First World on 'soft nationalism'. Behind the public rhetoric of housing need and social solidarity, many mass housing campaigns, with their language of combat and power, were bound up

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with authoritative, patriarchal social structures and strategies of forcible intervention or segregation - including residential zoning by race or social class. But this still permitted a wide variety of financing and organizational regimes, including private, philanthropic or co-operative agencies enjoying state support (often indirectly, via taxation concessions), or direct agencies of the state itself, whether area-based (municipal or national) or functionally-based, as with the housing projects directly built by government factories and enterprises under state-socialism.

There was constant debate about the optimum targeting of state-led housing campaigns: who should be the recipients? A balance of affordability and ethical prioritization had to be struck between the poorest citizens, often displaced through coercive clearances or squatter fires, and middling income groups that could cover more of their housing costs. There was a similarly wide range of tenure permutations between the extremes of public-rental and social home-ownership regimes – including various co-operative or condominium tenures. And, as I explained the lecture last night, Scandinavian and Nordic programmes spanned the full range of these permutations.

Architecturally, too, individual countries developed their own variants of the 'universal' formulae of international modernism. Most pressing were basic choices of building-patterns, such as between high apartment blocks and single-family dwellings, or between straightforward new development on city peripheries and surgical 'slum clearance' in inner-cities. Postwar mass housing

architecture was ultimately shaped by the avant-garde concepts of modernist pioneers, such as Corbusier or the Team 10 grouping, with their advocacy of dense cluster planning; but far more immediate were relatively impersonal factors such as land control, density pressures, or building-industry organisation.

On the ground, mass-housing architecture simplified and mixed together the main elite concepts, especially tall towers and slabs in open space, in countless local permutations. Many perpetuated elements from pre-Modernist phases of housing, including staircase-access 'sectional plans', adapted from 19th-century tenements into an infinitely-extensible formula ubiquitous in the postwar USSR; or the external gallery-access blocks of 19th-century philanthropic London, which mutated after 1945 into a more avant-garde variant (deck-access) and the dominant everyday pattern in the Netherlands (galerijbouw). Hundreds of colour illustrations, most specifically taken for this book, provide a visual overview of this incredible diversity.

Alongside these strong local specificities, the sub-regions of the First and Second Worlds, such as the Low Countries, the Nordic states and the Mediterranean world, also had common features of organisation and architecture: these subdivisions are reflected in the chapter-arrangement within Part B. E.g. Anglophone countries such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand all stressed state-promoted homeownership and mass slum-clearance.

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The closest satellites of the USSR, like Poland, East Germany, or Czechoslovakia – also resembled one another, even as other neighbours such as Yugoslavia and Romania diverged sharply. In particular, Yugoslavia's idiosyncratic 'self-management' political system generated often wildly eccentric built outcomes, combining Western architectural individualism and state socialist grand planning.

Within the Third World, as Chapter 14 shows, the relative weakness of many newly independent states, ensured the large-scale mobilisation process needed for mass housing only coalesced rarely, as well as in hybrid postcolonial societies such as Israel or Kuwait – not least because of the pressure by US-backed international aid agencies for 'aided self-help' as a more individualistic alternative to public rental housing. In two parts of the world – Latin America (chapter 13) and capitalist Eastern Asia (chapter 15) – distinctive region-wide housing patterns, significantly different from both the First and Second Worlds, emerged after 1945. These were shaped in Latin America by the frequent alternation of authoritarian and democratic regimes, the pervasiveness of anti-communism, and the addiction to spectacular, gestural housing campaigns, and in Eastern Asia by the Japanese-led coalescence of a new formula of state-directed developmental capitalism.

In both the First and Second Worlds, social housing programmes' very impact eventually made them vulnerable to opposition and protests, especially after the '1968' western upheavals and the 1989-91 revolution in the socialist bloc.
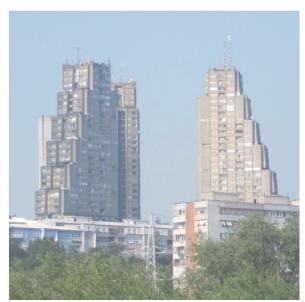

Figure 1 (Top): 'Towers of the Imagination' in Yugoslavia, Beograd: 'Rudo', completed in 1976
Figure 2: Organisational decentralism and architectural individualism in Yugoslavia: Novi Beograd Blocks 61-4, from 1971

From that point (Chapters 16-17), mass housing complexes became a lightning-rod for wider critiques of progress-led modernity, and accusations of top-down, alienating sameness in the former First and Second Worlds became universal – even as the new Asian 'front' heated up further.

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Although not infused with the same utopian reformist spirit as their 20th century predecessors, the programmes of countries such as Singapore, South Korea, China and Turkey accentuated the strong state formula, while radically intensifying the modernist architectural formula of massed apartment-construction in new, high-density ways. These vast achievements seem to belie the assumption that the only remaining housing options in the 21st century are 'unaffordable' free-market home-ownership housing in rich countries, and aided self-help in poor countries. Today, the concept of state-led 'progress' in housing now seems to be back on the agenda, but in a radically different form.

This authoritarian developmentalism, with its spectacular, politicised character, especially

Figures 3&4 1 Developmental Mass Housing in Turkey: Kayaşehir, Istanbul (TOKİ – from 2005)

in Chongqing's frenzied building campaign of 2010-12, underlines the continuing dominance of political expediency and local governmental cultures in shaping mass housing and its 'hotspots' across the world.

Very often, especially within the west, social-housing discussions have been framed in Enlightenment terms of universal rights and ideals, such as 'the welfare state', 'solving the housing problem', 'fighting homelessness', 'housing afford-ability', the 'disgrace of the slums', and so forth. But what this book has repeatedly demonstrated is the uncomfortable reality that the real driving forces of mass-housing construction have often been locally-specific political processes and emer-gency pressures – a tendency accentuated within authoritarian states. There, the intense politicisa-tion of 'homes for the people' has often projected a blatantly propagandist character, but the same has applied, more subtly, in democratic systems, for example in the heady rhetoric of the 'folkhem' or the 'miljonprogramm' in Sweden, or the giant gesture of Brasilia, which successively headquar-tered both democracy and authoritarianism.

Governments past and present have almost invar-iably offered 'mass housing aid' to those whose support or acquiescence they have needed, rather than those in the worst need. Since the downfall of state socialism and the decline of the post-war Western welfare state, mass-housing systems have largely been bound up with capi-talist developmentalism, as well as with external factors such as demographic pressures, and that alignment seems likely to continue: as historians

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Figure 5: China: Minan Huafu Estate, Chongqing (2010-12)

Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete and Dirk van den Heuvel asked in 2015, 'Will this be the story of the twenty-first century: welfare-state building without the welfare state?' My book expresses no view on whether that is good or bad, but merely records the change – as with the other phases of the 100 Years War!

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