

Disrupting the Commons. Social Change and the Emergence of New Subjects in Modern Housing

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Most dominant narratives in architectural theory, even from opposite positions, share their skepticism against the discipline's possibilities of being an emancipatory force in society. Either for understanding that it is too difficult for architecture to induce significant change or because they deem it unnecessary. This paper attempts to introduce a new perspective in that debate. Following Jacques Rancière's writings on the politics of esthetics, instead of looking for systemic transformations, it will aim to uncover discrete emancipatory episodes in the realm of architecture. These episodes happen as ambiguous moments of disruption of the architectural commons. New voices previously dismissed or ignored by architecture's dominant discourse emerge into visibility, altering what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible. In that way, the realm of our common shared experiences—of what can be expressed and who can express it—expands to new subjects and architectures. To exemplify these emancipatory disruptions, this paper will analyze three heterodox examples from the twentieth-century modern housing canon: Red Vienna's *Gemeindebauten*, Rome's *Quartiere Tiburtino*, and Ralph Erskine's *Byker Wall* in Newcastle. These cases can establish a baseline and an ancestry of emancipatory practices whose lessons might be helpful in our current context.

ARCHITECTURE AS A POLITICAL FORCE

The most accepted narrative about modern architecture's dreams of social change imagines them born out of the ideals of 19th-century social experiments and the boldness of early twentieth-century avant-garde movements. It then sees them propelled into significance during the postwar period to slowly decay until its collapse in the late 1970s with the postmodernist turn. The discipline that emerged from those ruins was forced into two distinct positions, both denying architecture's ability to be a transformative force in society. It could either detach itself from reality in search of "the inherent nature of the (architectural) object"¹, giving up, as Tafuri put it, "every dream of social function, every utopian residue."² Or, if it chose to engage with the real world—as suggested by figures like

Venturi or Koolhaas—, it had to remain uncritically submissive, seizing the opportunities that opened within capitalist societies, but "deferring the judgement"³ over their unjust social undercurrents. In the context that followed, the recent surge of activism intending for architecture to re-engage critically with society seems to have forgotten the emancipatory traditions of modernity.

This paper attempts to fill that void by revising how architectural discourse interprets the social and political realities where architecture operates. As Marshall Berman maintained, twentieth-century modernism was built on "rigid polarities and flat totalizations"⁴, and its intellectual legacy has since limited architecture's response to society to either "embrace it with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm", or else condemn it "with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt." In either case, modern society "is conceived as a closed monolith, incapable of being shaped or changed by modern men."

To distinguish the cracks in that monolith, we may need to dismiss some common notions used to discuss how social reality affects architecture and vice versa. Concepts like autonomy, criticality, or even utopia have proven too abstruse or ethereal to open narratives of actual social change. As Jacques Rancière points out, the main problem within critical thought is the fundamental disconnection "between critical procedures and any prospect of emancipation."⁵ The misalignment between critiques centered on denouncing "the dark, solid reality concealed behind the brilliance of appearances" and any real effects in that reality. A new approach that accepts critical theory's emancipatory tenets while diverging from its obsession with uncovering the system's dysfunctions might be the answer. This paper attempts such an approach by arguing that the cultural and social changes that shape contemporary architecture often emerge through discrete and ambiguous moments of disruption. Moments in which images, themes and subject groups that already exist but are deemed too ordinary and unworthy of attention for architecture's discourse emerge into visibility, altering what Jacques Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible." Changing the structure of the sensible means to alter the sphere of the commons, of what can be seen and experienced by all. Therefore, when those who

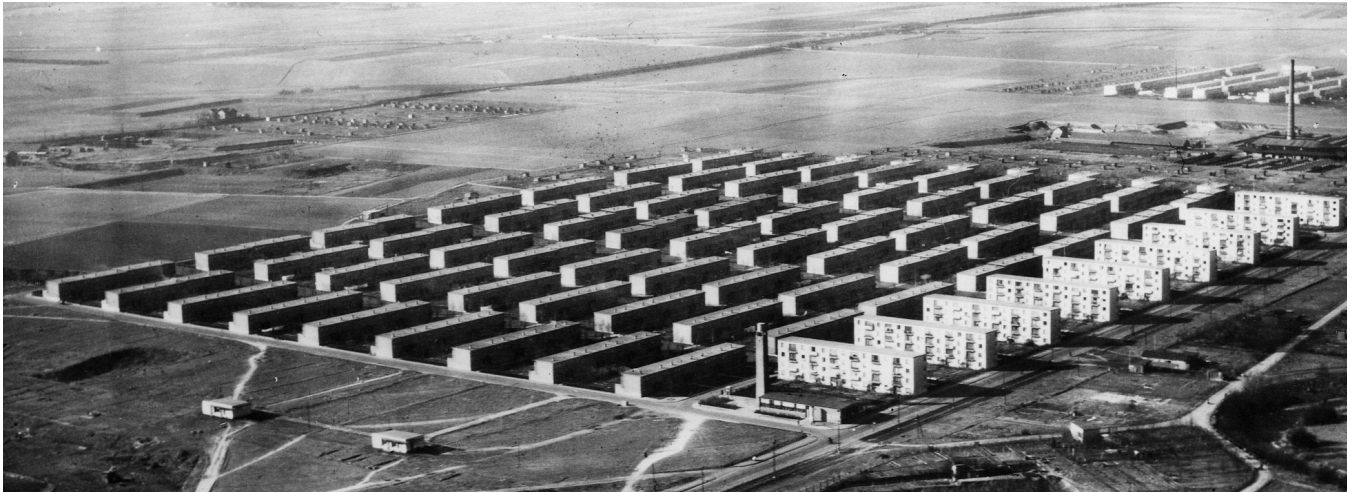


Figure 1. Westhausen Siedlung, Frankfurt. Aerial view, 1929. The repetitive composition of the row houses in Westhausen is characteristic of Ernst May's housing design in Frankfurt.

remain unseen within the horizon of architecture's discourse step into the light, it triggers a transformation of the political realm through the esthetic reconfiguration of the visible.

To further explore this idea, this article looks at three twentieth-century European social housing projects in which we may recognize—however fragile or unstable—the seeds of social emancipation. In all three of them, the revelation of new subjects not only altered for whom architecture was imagined but also prompted new esthetic imaginaries. The first one is Red Vienna's experiment, in which a socialist government disrupted the meaning of the European bourgeoisie city, turning the classical monuments of the ruling class into the everyday environments of the proletariat. Then, Rome's Quartiere Tiburtino in the early 1950s, where the need to house masses of rural migrants prompted the invention of a furiously antimodern neo-vernacular. And, finally, Newcastle's Byker Wall during the 1970s and 80s, whose long and convoluted participatory processes witnessed England's deindustrialization and Thatcher's erosion of working-class culture.

THE CHANGING DISCOURSE ABOUT ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIETY

The evolution of the dominant discourse on architecture and its relation with society throughout the twentieth century is anything but stable. An essential shift in this evolution appears between Siegfried Giedion's early works and his 1941 canonical text "Space, Time and Architecture." Earlier, Giedion had defined modern architecture through its potential for social change, stating that "for the first time in history, not the upper class but the lower class is a factor in the creation of a style"⁶. Roughly a decade later, he dismissed architecture's transformative role by proposing the notion of "synthesis." Accordingly, architects should prophetically recognize the hidden unity underneath modernity's complexity instead of aiming at its transformation. These two different notions, as Hilde Heynen

points out,⁷ delineate the political and ideological transition of modern architecture from a socially revolutionary position to its cultural canonization⁸. The focus shifts radically. From the oppressed classes as subjects that achieve new esthetic visibility through architecture to the architect as the heroic prophet of modernity, who summons "the secret synthesis that lies hidden behind the chaotic appearances"⁹ of modern societies.

HOUSING FOR ALL AND THE DISRUPTION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL COMMONS

Our common knowledge usually places the transition to non-figurative representation, the relinquishment of the old for the new, or the progressive technification of society as foundational for modern architecture. In contrast, Jacques Rancière¹⁰ looks at nineteenth-century realism, with its defiance of all the hierarchies of who can be the subject of esthetic representation, as what prepared us for the new language of abstraction. Realism expanded the territory of the sensible, of what may be considered art, by legitimizing ordinary people as the subjects of serious representation. It was the possibility for the equal recognition of everyone—even the anonymous masses—that gave a central role to the "mechanical arts" in the inception of modern culture. Therefore, photography or film began to be seen as art forms only because through them, "the anonymous became the subject matter of art"¹¹. If we follow the same logic when looking at modern architecture's technologies, they suddenly appear in a very different light. The fundamental transformation they brought into modernity's common sensorium was in how they created the possibility to include everyone and anyone, without exception, as subjects of architectural design, rather than in being the material expression of its time.

Therefore, twentieth-century social housing shares a fundamental similarity with nineteenth-century realism in that it constitutes a historical moment of redistribution of the



Figure 2. Karl Marx-Hof (1927) is paradigmatic of the grand interior courtyards in Red Vienna's *Gemeindebauten*.

sensible. This reorganization happens as an expansion of the architectural commons, understood as the discipline's shared images and values in front of society. As early as 1934, housing advocate Catherine Bauer argued that the "housing problem" of the early twentieth century "was no longer confined to providing shelter for paupers or clearing out a few particularly noisome slums."¹² Instead, it was "a problem of finding a new way to house everybody." By turning housing into a "Public Utility," the urban working classes went from being hidden inside dingy tenement blocks to becoming the frontal image of modernity. Politics, to Rancière, is not the fight for power but the struggle of an unrecognized party for equal recognition within the established order. This fight often takes place over the image of society, of what is permissible to be seen or said. Therefore, social housing's political dimension was related to gaining visibility and recognition by the working classes occupying it. However, there is an essential difference between the material emancipation early modern architects looked for and the political and esthetic one that Rancière upholds.

THE EXISTENZMINIMUM AND THE MODERNIST PARADIGM OF EMANCIPATION

The large-scale program of social housing projects—or *Siedlungs*—developed by Ernst May and others in Frankfurt during the 1920s clearly exemplifies the former. *Das Neue Frankfurt* was a pioneering attempt to change society through modern design by ensuring "the housing needs of the poor and the underprivileged were alleviated, as one aspect of

the increasing emancipation of all individuals."¹³ The material emancipation of the working class, "also implied the enhancement of the culture of everyday life."¹⁴ But to maintain its scale and social impact, this enhancement required the reduction of the units to the *Existenzminimum*—to the minimum possible dimension—and the removal of any unnecessary elements. As Mart Stam, one of the designers, explained, "correct measures are those that result in a minimum ostentation. Everything else is ballast..."¹⁵

These early attempts to provide spaces for all by forcing asceticism into the working masses shaped the dominant paradigm in modern housing during the following four decades. It is against the background of this paradigm, that we can discern discrete moments of aesthetic disruption and glimpses of emancipation. Compared to canonical modernism, these episodes share a sense of the ambiguity of modern culture that Marshall Berman claimed to be lost by the 20th-century avant-garde. Berman pointed out that, compared to the work of Marx, Nietzsche, or Baudelaire, which were "ironic and contradictory, polyphonic and dialectical,"¹⁶ the youthful modernism of the early twentieth century shrank its imaginative range. There might not be a better example of this shrinkage than the *Neue Frankfurt* projects like Mart Stam's Hellerhof or Ernst May's Römerstadt, and the simplified paradigm of emancipation they prefigured.

THE POLITICS OF ESTHETICS IN RED VIENNA'S PALACES OF THE PEOPLE

Compared to these Frankfurt projects, the Viennese *Gemeindebauten*—built by the city's socialist administration during roughly the same period—embraced an ambiguous understanding of modernity's imagination. Although modern historiographies have typically dismissed them, the transformative drive that fueled the architectures of the Red Vienna transpired an intensely modern energy. Their cultural horizon, however—their forms, esthetics and attitudes towards the existing city—did not adhere to the modernist canon. The *Gemeindebauten* didn't reject or wipe out—not physically nor symbolically—the architecture of the bourgeoisie city. Instead, they disrupted its meaning within society's commons by expanding for whom it could be imagined. The grandiose urban blocks that had housed the bourgeoisie of the industrial revolution now inspired the homes of the proletariat.

The scale of Vienna's socialist housing program was unprecedented in Europe. More than four hundred blocks of communal housing were built, comprising 64,000 units, which housed one-tenth of the city's population. All in less than fifteen years. With those numbers, there is little doubt about the program's impact on raising the living conditions of the working class. However, the model of social emancipation that Austro-Marxism aimed for was not just about material well-being. Beyond fulfilling the promise of turning housing into a public utility, Red Vienna's communal blocks were unique in how they expanded how



Figure 3. Children's swimming pool in Margareten, Vienna, 1923. Besides housing units, the Viennese *Gemeindebauten* included public facilities like schools, community centers, clinics or swimming pools. Photograph courtesy of the Weblexikon der Wiener Sozialdemokratie.

workers perceived and were perceived within the city. Unlike the peripheral locations of the modernist *Siedlungen* from Frankfurt or Berlin, the *Volkswohnpaläste*—or Palaces of the people—grew intertwined with the city's existing fabric. They were strategically located among middle-class neighborhoods, main thoroughfares and stations. The Viennese bourgeoisie was forced to coexist with those that they saw as inferiors within society's order. In this way, the *Gemeindebauten* challenged the removal of the poor from the symbolic and historic heart of the city, which had become common in large urban operations across Europe, such as Haussmannian Paris or Madrid's Gran Vía.

The communal blocks of the Red Vienna were not only purposely connected to the existing city. They were also inspired by it. The typology of housing blocks organized around a central public space, or *Höfe* was a traditional urban model dating back to eighteenth and nineteenth-century Vienna. Historians, including Manfredo Tafuri and Eve Blau,¹⁷ saw early philanthropic experiments in housing, such as Lobmeyrhof from 1901, as the main precursors to the 1920s *Gemeindebauten*. However, historian Carmen Díez Medina¹⁸ maintains that the primary reference for Red Vienna's blocks was the monumental housing model called *Gruppenzinshaus*, which "narrowed

distances between the residence of the aristocracy and that of the bourgeoisie"¹⁹. The *Gruppenzinshaus* were large residential blocks built around the Ringstraße and other central arteries during the second half of the nineteenth century, entangled with the city's main institutional structures. Buildings like the Palais Hansen, whose character was defined by its grandeur and monumentality, but also by the homogeneous image of wealth and prosperity it provided to the capital of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Accepting the common notion of politics as the administration of power—and in a veiled criticism of Austro-Marxism—Díez argues that Red Vienna reproduced the imperial "Blue Vienna" in how it kept control over the city's image and, therefore, over the city itself.

However, returning to Rancière, repurposing the main images of wealth and power at the service of those excluded from society constitutes an act of esthetic emancipation. An expansion of how the architectural commons is seen, understood and acknowledged by society. Unlike canonical modernism, the Viennese *Gemeindebauten* did not attempt to express a cultural synthesis. Their main purpose is to disrupt the established order of things by challenging who may live in which architecture. Their ornamental facades and the sculptures in their courtyards, gardens and squares were ways of questioning



Figure 4. Celebration at Karl-Marx Hof, circa 1930.

the idea that the poor belong in a realm determined by needs, which only can be resolved through functional solutions.

QUARTIERE TIBURTINO AND THE DISRUPTIVE POTENTIAL OF INCONSISTENCY

Rome's Quartiere Tiburtino was the first project of the public postwar housing program INA Casa. The neighborhood had been designed by a team of young architects led by Mario Ridolfi and Ludovico Quaroni, and it was intended for the masses of rural migrants that moved to Rome from the *Mezzogiorno* after the war. The fragmented randomness of its spatial design purposely rejected modern rationality to empathize with its occupants and the nuance of their culture. Carlo Aymonino has argued that the whole operation may be felt as if the buildings of the new neighborhood were "constructions that have arisen spontaneously in successive moments over time,"²⁰ and its current occupants are not newcomers, but have inhabited it for generations. Therefore, Tiburtino's main objective was no less than dissolving the condition of migrants as unstable citizens through an architectural illusion. It was a spatial operation of inclusivity, which intended to re-enfranchise a people through the political power of esthetics. While Red Vienna brought the excluded into the architecture of the powerful, in Rome's Tiburtino the vernacular spaces of the excluded pierce the commons of modern architectural discourse.

Precisely for its relevance to the poetics of Tiburtino, Bruno Reichlin²¹ has drawn attention to the analysis of this period's Italian poetry by Walter Siti.²² Siti studied the techniques employed by postwar poets like Milo De Angelis, who experimented with a simplified and wrong syntax, full of ellipsis, interjections and unnecessary repetitions. Like the forms and materials of the Tiburtino, De Angelis' poetry was inspired by everyday language and dialects, giving a recognizable voice to the excluded subjects *par excellence*: migrants and workers. This linguistic mimesis induces an identification with a social subject, suggesting that "behind the imitation of spoken language, there is an adhesion to the lacerations of the culture to which it is addressed."²³ The aim of the ellipsis, the unfinished sentences and the elimination of syntactic links is to "provoke seemingly illogical associations of ideas that ignore the normal relationship of cause and effect,"²⁴ and therefore, "a rejection of the whole system of hierarchies and connections"²⁵ of modern language. Reichlin sees Tiburtino's appeal to its users analogously. Indeed, the neighborhood's architectural forms can only be understood from a position of resistance and denial of the principles of rationalism that drove Italian architecture before the war. Reichlin further suggests that, in the Tiburtino, after the "apparent lack of compositional hierarchy and structural order," there is a latent "anti-modern rebellion against the alleged logical and formal necessity that had been symbolically taken as an expression of the most radical rationalism."²⁶

However, such interpretation limits itself to the value of resistance; to the usual role of critical theory. But the disruption that

Ridolfi and Quaroni introduced with the neighborhood's spatial complexity also implies an expansive impulse by complicating and enlarging how modern architecture may relate to its users. This was neither a nostalgic vernacular nor an ironic postmodern. It was an ambiguous cultural product—a rural village with the density of an urban neighborhood—that rejected modernity while defending its productive and emancipatory ethos. Like Red Vienna's *Gemeindebauten*, it turned a forgotten subject—the rural migrant—into a new protagonist of the modern city. And, in that way, it expanded the realm of the sensible; and the political and esthetic possibilities of modern architecture.

CONSTRUCTED FICTIONS AND EVERYDAY REALITIES IN BYKER

During a long process from the late 1960s to the peak of Thatcherism in the mid-1980s, British-Swedish architect Ralph Erskine designed and built a unique housing project in Newcastle's working-class community of Byker. With a particular emphasis on citizens' participation, it resettled close to 12,000 people. Moving them from crumbling Victorian row houses into new public housing units, distributed between a meandering perimeter wall filled and a series of smaller-scale clusters. The project's implementation lasted almost two decades during a particularly turbulent period in UK's history. From the progressive deindustrialization of Northern England and Margaret Thatcher's erosion of working-class culture to the growing racial diversity in British cities.

In previous projects, Erskine had hinted at an open architecture that works as "an organized framework", in which its occupants could alter facades or common spaces, and, where "do-it-yourself and self-help activities fused with recreational and social interaction".²⁷ Although Erskine had worked as a traditional top-down modern architect, he developed an interest in "the inventiveness and artistry with which people solved the needs which were peculiar to their situation and time."²⁸ This interest crystallized in Byker's initiatives for user involvement, which became the most distinctive feature of the project, as well as the most polemical one. Jeremy Till maintains that in participatory processes, "the role of the architect becomes that of understanding and drawing out the spatial implications of urban storytelling".²⁹ These small stories incorporate into the project as a form of "indeterminacy and contingency"³⁰ that needs to be translated by the architect.

At Byker, the emergence of the hidden narratives of the existing community's everyday life as a complex architectural composite expands the possibilities of the common sensorium. In Vienna and Tiburtino workers and migrants disrupt society's accepted patterns when they claim their role as esthetically visible subjects. In Byker, the subject is the community itself, with its existing ties and unresolved conflicts. Its working-class condition is not archetypal, as in Vienna, but specific. Rancière maintains that emancipatory politics only occur as the dislocation of the distribution of the sensible, as the moment of

disruption in which new voices try to be heard. The disruption of Byker's voice—of its everyday storytelling—in the form of architecture through Erskine's project, might be one of those moments.

This approach opposes the idea of the architect as a problem-solver, always acting defensively in the face of negativity and each problem's specificity. The architect of participatory processes emerges then as a "negotiator of hope"³¹, forced to work with the ambiguous material of citizens' dreams. Byker's project is arguably a paradigmatic example of the architect's use of such street narratives. The daily life of the former Byker was sustained in a structure of social relations based on solidarity between neighbors, which served as an antidote to the social and economic stress that, as unskilled workers, most of them suffered.

Byker critics focused on Erskine's inability to retain many of the original occupants—most moved to other areas during the long relocation process—and the failure to involve Byker's people in "the formulation of policies and their subsequent execution".³² However, from an architectural standpoint, Byker's internal complexity represents an attempt to allow its social ties and everyday storytelling to emerge into visibility. The immense design effort of avoiding repetition at all costs and producing an endless catalog of details had the aim of recreating the complexity of a real community's life. In that case, the subject revealed by the alteration of the sensible is the community as a whole. Even if its actual members were now absent. These three imperfect examples of social emancipation and disruption of the architectural commons comprise a discourse that resonates in our present. In a moment when social justice has become part of our mainstream culture, and new subjects are emerging into visibility, a discourse in which politics is fueled by esthetic disruption seems quite appropriate. And while it is hard to disagree with the idea that architecture cannot solve large social problems by itself, it is also quite reasonable to defend that it should engage with them. This paper shows that the emancipatory theories that thinkers like Rancière have proposed by redefining what politics and aesthetics are, might be a valid way to build that engagement. As well as to create new perspectives about modern architecture's emancipatory experiences.



Figure 5. Ralph Erskine, Byker Redevelopment, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK, Children and ice cream truck in the foreground (Public Domain Mark Image. Photographer: Hisao Janake) Image caption. Image credit.

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