A CENTURY OF PUBLIC HOUSING IN BERLIN

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Public housing projects involve great capital investments. They are therefore usually a good indicator of the reigning political framework at that time.The last one hundred years of public housing in Berlin can be divided into at least six different periods. The different political models and financing systems produced housing projects of different structures, dimensions and architectural expressions. The original financing scheme that followed Chancellor Bismarck's introduction of the Public Pension Fund System brought about a wealth of different architectural expressions. This rich variety of building type and stylistic character lasted through the end of the Weimar Republic and has not been regained since.

Architecture and urban development are both very complex issues, depending on many different factors. It is, within the very limited framework of this paper, quite impossible to go into depth on all these issues. Therefore, whenever wandering astray, the main issue of analysis is the correspondence between the housing developments and the means of financing it.

History

1880's through World War I

Bismarck, Chancellor of the Reich from 1871 to 1890, introduced the Pension Fund System in the early 1880's as a first tier of the German Social Security System. Under this law, from one day to the next millions of workers began to pay money into publically supervised national funds. The administrators of these funds, looking for safe long-term investments, started to invest heavily into public housing. Usually these loans were given out at below money market rates if the debtor met certain criteria (e.g. to build housing for the working class). Within a few years housing co-ops started to mushroom in all the major industrial areas of Germany, especially in the Ruhr Valley, Hamburg and Berlin.

The political orientation of the housing co-ops, depending on the social class they belonged to, ranged from the right to the far left. These co-ops selected their own architects that would best translate their ideals into a built environment. The architectural language was accordingly diverse and that diversity could be valued even higher than the quality of the individual architecture. It is almost certain that this architectural pluralism was not intended by the designers of the Pension Fund System but nevertheless a direct consequence of it. This first boom of construction lasted up to the beginning of World War I.

One significant feature of most of these first projects is their gesture of "turning to the inside." Most of these co-ops searched for identity within themselves and thus created distinct semi-public inner-courts, little ideal worlds within.

One of the first co-op developments was the first building for the Berliner Spar- und Bauverein of 1892, by Alfred Messel in 1899/1900. The Fritschweg housing area built by Paul Mebes in 1907 for the Beamten Wonhnungs Verein, is viewed as one of the gemstones of this era. Outstanding examples of this era are the Garden Cities. They never reached Howard's ideals as independent economic and political entities but they nevertheless turned into very habitable suburbs. The Siedlung Falkenberg of 1913-15 is well known for its vivid colouring scheme which has been under reconstruction for many years. The Gartenstadt Staaken, built during the wartime in 1913-17 is very modest in its architectural expression. Nevertheless Paul Schmitthenner was able to create a distinct community.

Post-World War I

After WW I and the hyperinflation of 1923 due to Germany's gigantic reparation payments, most of the cash and stocks the national funds owned were worthless. Their real estate investments remained largely intact though. Due to general lack of money, Martin Wagner, then building superintendent of Schöneberg 1918-20 (when it ceased to be an individual municipality), was primarily concerned with creating low-cost self-sustaining communities. His first major project in this function was the Lindenhofsiedlung (1918-21), almost a Garden City within the city.

Wagner analyzed the concept of small housing coops as basically good. Nevertheless he found these small institutions to be totally overwhelmed by the tasks of planning, financing and construction supervision. In light of the very high demand for housing following the war, in 1924 he founded the GEHAG, the "Gemeinnützige Heimstätten AktienGesellschaft" (Mutual Homestead Stock Corporation). The GEHAG, structurally a co-op of co-ops, came close to the role of an American developer. The co-ops would formulate their needs and all other tasks would be carried out by the GEHAG. Bruno Taut became the chief architect of the GEHAG, which put him

in a position of tremendous leverage. Later he would reflect on this time as "his seven fat years!"

These activities culminated in the first international building exhibit in 1930 with four "Grosssiedlungen" (large housing estates). The two entries from Bruno Taut were the Onkel-Tom-Siedlung (Parrot housing area) of 1926-28 and 1929-32 and the Hufeisensiedlung (Horseshoe Housing area) of 1925-27. The other two entries for the building exhibit were the Weisse Stadt (White City) of 1929-31, under the leading design of O.R. Salvisberg and the Siemensstadt of 1929-31 which contained a potpourri of designs by (most prominent) H. Scharoun, W.Gropius, H. Häring, O. Bartning.

The Wohnstadt Carl Legien in Prenzlauer Berg was erected at the same time (1928-30) by Bruno Taut, though not formally part of the exhibit. Unlike the other developments it was built in an inner city district.
The execution of this housing as exhibition projects extended into the late 1920s and marked the high ground of the development. It also was the end point of architecture in the Weimar Republic.

Nazi Era:

Housing was not high on the Nazi agenda. Their housing areas, unlike fascist developments in Italy, avoided modern architectural expression. They had a fundamental distrust for the many different co-ops, as the saw their own dominance threatened by the diversity and the following unpredictability. The Nazis therefore founded a new master housing organization: the "Neue Heimat." Unlike the GEHAG, which took on the role of a specialized developer that would leave the independence of the co-ops untouched, the "Neue Heimat" was specifically targeted at bringing in line the many different co-ops.

Until 1939 the number of finished apartments in Berlin approximately matched the figures during the Weimar Republic, though they were constructed at a much lower (technical) standard. In order to save money coal furnaces were reintroduced and most developments usually had more than two apartments on one floor, thus eliminating cross-ventilation. They also lacked central infrastructure or communal services like wash-houses of many co-ops during the Weimar era.

Two Nazi developments are noteworthy. The Grazer Damm of 1938-40 is a public housing development. It resembles the looks of military barracks. The SS-Kameradschaftssiedlung of 1938-40, was built for the lower to middle ranks of SS-officers. This elite was forced to live in houses, smaller than the working class elite in the Onkel-Tom Housing Area, right next door.

Post World War II Development:

After WW II not only the cash and stocks of the national funds were worthless, also their building stock was reduced to rubble. There was practically no capital left to pay off the pensions of the retired generation. As this would have been the source of major civil unrest, the government under Chancellor Adenauer in 1957 changed the German retirement benefit system from the Pension Fund System to a "Generation Contract." Under that contract the current active generation pays for the benefits of the retired generation and the state guarantees that the next generation will act in a similar way. This action had several significant consequences. The role of the pension funds substantially change from being long-term investors to a state bank that simply shuffled money from one generation to the other.

Because the pension funds as creditors for long term financing of housing were practically gone, there were no longer any substantial funds for financing affordable housing. Subsequently the government stepped in and started to directly subsidize public housing. At first the federal and state governments subsidized the capital, after the early 1970s they guaranteed a certain payment per built floor space. Not only did this ultimately inflate the cost of construction, it also made public housing even more dependent on the winds of change under whatever political (and architectural) party was in charge.

For the first five years after WW II construction in Berlin was primarily concerned with rebuilding existing damaged structures. Nevertheless, architects and politicians believed that the problems of the future could only be solved at the large rather than small scale. Therefore the "Neue Heimat" was not split back into the small co-ops, but turned over to the control of organized labour unions and nurtured even further. This led to the assembly of a huge building company that eventually had little in common with the original social reform ideals of the 1920s. Most people (including the politicians) knew little about the history of the original co-op idea, and the fact that it had not had a chance for the past 50 years. Eventually, a huge corruption scandal surfaced in the early 1980s that was effectively used by conservative forces to question the quality of public housing altogether. Modern architects viewed the war and all the destruction as an opportunity to entirely restructure the face of the cities in the process of rebuilding them. Their ideals reached back to the famous CIAM congress of 1933 or Corbusier's plans for the "Ville Radieuse." The idea was indeed to move great numbers of the city dwellers out to these satellite cities. Once enough vacancies had been created in the inner city, it would then be rebuilt from scratch. The sky was the limit. This was the underlying concept for the all of the satellite cities to be built through the early 1980s.

The first prominent croppings of this new ideal were the prestigious architectural landmarks of the 1950s. The Stalinallee (1951-60) in the East (currently the largest connected architectural landmark in Europe) and the Hansaviertel of 1957 in the West are diametric in their architectural expression. Nevertheless their planners were similarly ignorant towards existing structures. Totally in line with modern ideology they treated the existing landscape as tabula rasa.

With these world-changing visions in mind, why worry about a few (fundamental) design flaws? One of the most prominent developments of that era, the Märkische Viertel of 1963-74 (housing in the order of 40,000 people), though erected at the very perimeter of West-Berlin, were planned without any rail-bound public transport. Planners believed that the extension of a few bus lines into the housing area would provide adequate

transportation. The Gropiusstadt (1962-72), in comparison, is much better off, as it at least has a subway connection. In a similar way, the East Berlin housing areas, of which Marzahn is the most prominent one, are connected to the East-Berlin trolley car system.

One outstanding example of (late) modernism and its craze over mobility is the "Schlangenbader Strasse Development" of 1976-81. This housing project is built on top of and across a city highway.

Post-(After) Modernism

The energy crisis of 1973-74 pulled the rug out from under the modern movement. The basic ideals of "farther, faster, higher, don't worry everything is under control," the belief that everything is manageable (as expressed so very well in the clean crisp architectural language of Park Avenue in New York City) was fundamentally shattered. Subsequently, construction differed between East and West. While construction in East-Berlin began to suffer from the weak economy of the GDR it still followed the tradition of peripheral housing estates, using pre-cast concrete panels (Plattenbauten).

West-Berlin, ever since the end of WW II, but especially since the building of the Wall, suffered from an exodus of corporations and young skilled labour. It was therefore heavily subsidized by the federal government in Bonn and was in turn able to afford to subsidize any one of the arts, including architecture.

By the mid-1970s, the basic needs had already been met, and so this building phase was basically one of saturation, filling architectural missing teeth here and there. The culmination of this trend was the International Building Exhibition from 1979 through 1987, known as IBA. During this era housing rents were financed up to approximately 75 percent through subsidies. This resulted in totally inflated building costs.

As Goerd Paeschken put it: "As long as the space standards of the government were not exceeded, the water faucets could have been solid gold, but it was simply impossible to arrive at creative individual solutions."

Most of the major public housing companies, including the GEHAG, around this time began to calculate in WE (Wohneinheiten, Habitation Units) which illustrated well how detached they had become from their original ideals.

Of the post-modern developments the Böcklerpark (1974-78) is the earliest one and clearly shows the difficulties the architects had transforming from one design paradigm (modern) to the other (post-modern). The housing blocks at Fraenkelufer by Hinrich und Inken Baller (1982-84) were the shining star of the IBA-old. This housing area was by far the most intensely subsidized of all the IBA developments. Another highlight is the Tegeler Hafen (Tegel Harbour) of 1985-88 for which Charles Moore provided the Master Plan and the "Cinderella Castle" and library. All the other buildings were designed by various architects, a standard procedure during the IBA trying to create diversity. Similar developments were the Ritterstrasse and Rauchstrasse (1980s). For both developments Rob Krier provided the Master Plan and the individual structures were designed by various offices.

Post-Unification

After unification the situation dramatically changed once again. Government coffers are totally depleted, the subsidies by the federal government for (West-)Berlin were cut faster than expected. With the necessity gone to use West-Berlin as a showcase to the East of how much better the free world was, generous spending on public housing no longer appeared necessary and was drastically cut. Instead large sums were thrown in the direction of political or corporate developments (Government, Olympics 2000, Potsdam Square, Technology Parks, etc.). There is nevertheless still need for affordable housing — especially due to high rents, condo-conversions, etc. As a result, it is once again time to think about sustainable development and clever ways of financing. Most of the current public-financed housing projects are continuations of the methods of the post-modern era just at lower costs, at the expense of construction quality and secondary infrastructure. It is therefore high time to search for effective means of construction under scarce financial resources, just as it was necessary to do around the turn of the century. It is equally important to create structures which maximize the identification of tenants with their immediate environment as it has been amply analyzed that the expenses for maintenance in such developments are substantially lower.

Conclusion

This overview of Berlin's century-old tradition of public housing raises the possibility of searching for new models by adapting those from the past.

Today the modern ideal of the functionally separated city is still being built in large dimensions though under a post-modern facade. New developments in the socalled "Speckgürtel" (fat girdle) around Berlin are at risk of repeating the very same mistakes as 30 years earlier. Without any secondary infrastructure and hardly any connection to public transportation they are doomed to become mere bedroom communities as so many before them.

I find that the best models for the future definitely lie in the first era, when pension fund money was widely spread to various housing corporations. This "pluralism of ideas," had the advantage of not dominating with any single form of architectual expression, thus insuring against artificiality, monotony. Applying one single dogmatic method or solution always bears the risk of being wrong. In taking a darwinistic view one could argue that the production of a certain level of quality needs a sufficient amount of ideas to select from. Certainly Bismarck had no specific architectural quality in mind when he introduced the Pension Fund System, but in retrospect this was a very welcome side effect of the original political decision.

Even the IBA of 1987, which set out to do away with the large developments and reclaim the urban block, fell short in composing blocks with a level of individuality the old housing areas have. Most of IBA's projects were designed under a specific large scale program, within a very limited time-frame, under very similar financing conditions and space standards, and under one guiding architectural ideal. These housing areas just fake a pluralism that they really do not embody.

The pension funds insured a constant supply of capital for housing construction. After their loss as a stabilizing force in the financing of public housing in Germany, one could argue that these developments were increasingly forced into line of whatever architectural and political fashion reigning at any given time. This has definitely not been to the advantage of an overall healthy urban fabric and was in fact detrimental to a sustained development of German communities.

The choice of the Adenauer government in the 50's to change from a Pension Fund System to a Reshuffling System made all too much sense in light of two lost World Wars, one hyperinflation after WW I and another mandated devaluation after WW II. After these massive blows, there was simply no money left in the Pension Fund System. Instead of admitting the loss of capital and making strides to regain it, the federal government gave up on that idea altogether. Under the firm belief that there would be continuous growth that in retrospect would finance the necessary subsidies, the federal government took up a massive mortgage on the future. It is over one generation later that the negative effects of this short-sighted decision are felt both on the economic as well as the residential front.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the system of subsidizing capital for public housing development was maintained with the main difference that this time the money came directly from the government making it far more susceptible to the "winds of change" both political and aesthetical. The next blow was dealt to public housing when the Social Democrats in the 1970s changed the system of subsidizing the capital to one of subsidizing the costs. This lead directly to an inflation of construction costs and eroded any kind of competition for economic solutions and the best ideas.

Ironically almost at the same time when financing public housing appears almost impossible, the German retirement system has come under massive fire. Several German politicians have recently admitted that the retirement system should reinvest a part of the money into a capital base once again. This would make the pension system less vulnerable to short term economic strains when, due to higher unemployment, fewer people pay into the retirement system. Such a capital base, invested in part in housing would provide capital for new high quality and diverse urban areas. The government in turn could be allowed a further withdrawal from the process of subsidizing public housing (objects) and in turn subsidze the needy (subjects) directly and only for as long as these people really need it. In doing so it could leave the creation of quality housing projects to those that have proved to be capable thereof.

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FROM THE GROW HOME TO THE NEXT HOME

MANIFESTATIONS AT THE HEART OF ACADEMIA

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Introduction

Numerous recent socio-demographic changes have contributed to a shift in housing accommodation away from the traditional North American single-detached home towards a variety of dwelling types which have in common two highly significant features: a reduced dwelling size and increased unit density. Smaller families, the proliferation of the non-traditional family type and of the two-income family, a decrease in household size, and an increase in the population of elderly citizens have created the demand for a housing unit that is both smaller and more efficient than the large, detached house that many middle-class Canadians took for granted in their youths. Builders and designers can no longer ignore the new contemporary household with its diversity of interior design needs in their consideration of future housing prototypes.

The Grow Home

The Grow Home was unveiled in June 1990 on the McGill University campus and opened to the public for a period of four weeks. The Grow Home was a 93-square-metre townhouse, 4.3 metres wide. The narrow-front rowhouse configuration was adopted to maximize land-use efficiency and minimize infrastructure and heating costs, while the absence of interior load-bearing partitions made the space easily adaptable. The unit's small size and simple layout was aimed at reducing construction costs, and the use of conventional materials and traditional elevation design was intended to facilitate acceptance by both builders and buyers. The ground floor in the prototype consisted of a kitchen/dining area and a living room separated by a central bathroom/plumbing core. To further decrease costs, an unpartitioned second floor was suggested which could later be divided to include two bedrooms and a second bathroom. Consultation on the design of the units between the developer of the pilot project and the university led to the development of a second option for the ground floor plan, where floor space was opened to accentuate the full depth of the house.

Six months after the demonstration unit was dismantled, an east-end developer started a pilot project based on the Grow Home concept. During that same period, both provincial and municipal governments implemented programs aimed at promoting housing starts for first-time buyers through interest and tax reduction incentives. With the aid of these incentives, all of the project's 87 units were sold within the first four weeks — before any ground was broken. Twelve other builders soon followed suit. Within the first 10 months, 19 projects with a total of over 660 units were built in and around the Montreal area, ranging in price from $69,000 to $95,000. Several new projects have since been started, bringing the total up to approximately 6,000 units.

The Next Home

The Next Home — a second research project of the McGill School of Architecture Affordable Homes Program, was presented as a demonstration unit on the McGill campus in the summer of 1996. The Next Home extends the research undertaken on the Grow Home project. Key features of the Next Home include buying only the quantity of space that the user needs and can afford, housing affordability, designing the interior layout by selecting from a catalogue of components, flexibility to change and grow, choice of facade design, environmental responsibility and comfort, export potential, and a new urban perspective.

Today's adult Canadians conduct their lives in many ways unlike their parents and grandparents. In order to accommodate the fluctuations in today's households as they move from stage to stage in their evolving life cycles, an adaptable and responsive housing form is urgently required. The new flexible unit must be able to change in accordance with the household changes of its occupants. The centrality of the television in the living and family spaces of the house, the need for communications outlets (telephone, computer) in most rooms, the growth of home offices, the accommodation of freezer and microwave in the kitchen to facilitate the increasingly rushed schedules of residents: all of these functions and activities will need to be addressed adequately in homes where more women than ever participate in the paid work force and where everyone — male and female — simply works harder and longer. In both the design and technical spheres of the Next Home, a lifestyle of increased technological complexity and reduced leisure time will be acknowledged in all aspects from the design of living rooms and bathrooms to the provision of vital electronic lifelines.

The restructuring of the North American economy away from resource-based activities and heavy manufacturing industries resulting in a greater population