The Development of European Mass Housing Projects in the Post War Era

Several factors, both cultural and material, contributed to the development of mass housing in the post war era. The social circumstances resulting from the two World Wars figured most significantly to this development, being the reason for the large number of dwellings needed, as well as providing the model for the methods used to construct them.

After the First World War, there was a shortage of housing that was the result of men, materials and capital having been directed at the war effort. Five million men were demobilized, and many needed housing. (Power 2002) At this time, private renting was still prevalent, and rents rose as a result of the shortage. The famous Clydeside Rent Strike in Scotland, where munitions workers refuse to pay the rising rents prompted the government to impose rent controls. However, this move had the effect of stopping landlords from providing housing, and there was a drop in supply in addition many existing units left in disrepair. The government had a fear of revolution from a population still unsettled from the war, with soldiers coming home to poor housing conditions and high rents. There was also a severe worldwide economic depression at this time. Three million people were unemployed in the U.K., and the state was genuinely concerned that Bolshevism would spread to the city of London if the well-being of the people was not met with improved living conditions at affordable rents. Directly after the war, the state ran two-thirds of all the workforce and economy; thus the state was the only entity capable of providing the goal of 500,000 housing units within five years to satisfy the housing demand. In 1919, the Addison Act was passed, which was a subsidy for building housing given to local authorities. Britain was one of the few countries to already have established local authorities at this time, which contributed to its ability to organize the construction of housing on a large scale. The Tudor Walters Act coincided with the Addison Act and was an outline for the design of the houses that were to be built.

When World War II began in 1941, the housing problem resulting from the First World War had still not been solved, and the numbers still not met for the housing needs of the people. Again, materials, men and capital were concentrated toward the war effort, and the problems of overcrowding, deterioration of the existing stock, and associated conditions that were creating slums in the city grew more intense. Additionally, the U.K. suffered more physical destruction (comparatively to World War I) and a significant amount of the housing stock was lost through bombing. The state response was once more to impose rent controls, which had the direct effect of making the physical housing conditions even worse. Health and hygiene issues were a looming concern for the state, and slum clearance was seen as part of the solution to the housing crisis. Also, close inspection of men directly after World War I made the government aware of the poor physical condition of the general population and realized that it needed fit men for the war. In fact, the first housing programs in the U.K. were through the department of health.

The means used by the state to build homes was through subsidies to private landlords and to local authorities to build where they saw fit. It was the local authorities that decided which areas to clear and what type of housing
to build in the leveled neighborhoods. The building type favored by the local authorities was the two-storey terrace and the detached cottage with garden. Most families preferred the later, and although the local authorities had ambitious plans to build ‘Homes fit for Heroes’, of high quality and good location, the money soon began to run out. The state, however, built 10,000 large new estates and 28 ‘New Towns’ by this time. The aim of the government to fill a general need for a certain number of houses and built to a certain quality from 1945-1951 had turned to building the largest number of ‘housing units’ for the least amount of money. In 1954, the general government subsidy provided to the local authorities was withdrawn. Slum clearance programs during this same time period had in fact added to the number of dwelling that were needed, and overcrowding remained a problem in the poor communities that had managed to escape the bulldozer thus far.

Thus in the 1950s, the government still faced the problem of a housing shortage, which needed to be met with reduced funds. Flats were seen as the answer to this dilemma, and a high-rise subsidy was introduced by central government. The aesthetic of high-rise buildings was also seen as a symbol of a new modern world. The means of production used to win both World Wars – mass production – went from being used to produce munitions and machinery for the war to producing consumer items such as cars and appliances. This methodology was then extended to produce buildings, eventually leading the way to a new architectural movement. However, many problems came to be associated with this building type.

The ideology introduced by the French architect Le Corbusier, the primary leader of the modernist architectural movement, envisioned an architecture that promoted a housing typology designed as ‘a machine for living’, in the same way that an airplane was ‘a machine for flying’ (de Soeten, Edelkoort, 1995). The tenets of his vision were of a building form that promoted an efficiency of living, both in economic terms of building materials, as well as how individual lives were carried out. This philosophy was heavily influenced by the First World War (and later by the second), and was manifested both in how buildings were made as well as in how they were used. The mechanization of production that began on a large scale at this time found resonance with many architects and designers of the era. The idea of building components being fabricated in a factory and then quickly assembled at the site was seen as a way to increase efficiency in terms of time and material, and reduce waste. The form that these buildings took was also seen as post war freedom from tyranny in a ‘brave new world’. The components that Le Corbusier’s used to create his buildings (ossature indépendante, plan libre, façade libre, pilotis, toit-jardin, and brise soliel) were intended to create an open plan, not bound by a multitude of stuffy rooms with little or no ventilation and no view to the outdoors. The freeing of the façade from being a typically load bearing structure to an insulator, provided an opportunity for continuous windows across a building to let in as much light as possible and provide uninterrupted views. This type of open plan was to allow room for the individual to dictate what a room would be, and arrange objects within it to suit specific desires. When conducting research after being awarded the commission to design the Dominican monastery of La Tourette in 1952 in France, Le Corbusier visited the Cistercian monastery of Le Thoronet. “Le Thoronet is the loud speakers of light and shadow", was the phrase that Le Corbusier used in describing this small monastery. The comparison of his perception of a 13th century Cistercian monastery with that of a loud speaker – a modern wonder of
technology is important in understanding how not only Le Corbusier, but very likely much of his generation, perceived modern technology and its possibilities.

Another example of this post-war thinking in the field of design is the work of Charles and Ray Eames, and the work they produced in the 1950s and 1960s. One of their main contributions in the field of industrial design was the idea of using technology developed in wartime (World War II in this case), some of which they were directly involved with (they were hired by the U.S. Military to design leg splits with the plastic mold technology they had developed). Their main tenet was ‘to bring quality design to the masses’ with the use of mass production techniques, primarily with regards to furniture. Their Case Study house won a post World War II design contest in the U.S. for house designs for the returning soldiers, much in the spirit of ‘Homes fit for Heroes’ in the U.K. The house was designed and built with this idea of mass-produced, high quality design available to the common citizen. The Eames Case Study house used an off-the-shelf industrial kit of parts, with an open plan and glazed curtain walls. The spirit of the generation that embraced these modernist ideas is important to understand why the ideas of mass housing and pre-fabricated construction figured so strongly in post-war housing solutions both in the U.K. and elsewhere.

The Greater London Council saw this approach to building as the answer to filling the tremendous need for housing after World War II. Not only was it believed that this building type would solve the numbers problem, but that it would symbolize the promise and freedom of a generation liberated from tyranny and war. However, the difference in how this method was applied differed substantially from the original vision and purpose of the modern and post-modern movement. The mass production of houses did not suit the people of Britain for several reasons. Firstly, the country had a long tradition, and preference, for the single detached house with a garden as previously mentioned. This ideal was strongly rooted in the cultural mindset of the people; the introduction of large block estates was jarring to many for their sheer immensity of scale and lack of connection to the ground. Although the war mentality of joining together for a common cause was strong with regards to individual goods, the transfer of this commonality of need did not suit the people in terms of private homes. An essential flaw in viewing dwellings as mass-produced commodity goods is that they are not goods alone; they are fixed, an integral part of the household that inhabits them. John Turner best describes this idea, when he stated that the home is best understood ‘as a verb instead of a noun.’ (1976) Also differing in approach and implementation was the rigidity in how they were constructed; where Corbusier allowed room for variation for the curved stair or double height opening to provide views, the mass housing estates allowed for none of this spatial variety. Similarly with the Eames house example, the industrial methods and materials were sited in a spacious garden and the house itself filled with the museum-like treasures the couple had collected for decades – a use not likely with a poorer groups that mass housing was intended for in Britain. This housing type was also not accepted by the public, due to its exclusive use for the poor. Having first been built and inhabited by low-income groups, it became a symbol for poverty and living in the margins, literally and figuratively. Thus ‘getting out’ was seen as progress for a household living in a mass housing estate, and the aim of all who lived there from the very beginning of their tenure (Power, 1987). Comparatively in Tokyo, for example, where so much of the city was
bombed that the majority of the population was housed in post-war mass-housing blocks, this building type never acquired the stigma that it has in the West since there was little or no alternative.

By 1976, there was a large surplus of mass housing in the U.K. There had been a complete neglect to properly manage social housing, on both large and smaller estates. This only began to be recognized by the state in the late 1960s (although it had been advocated by housing reformers such as Octavia Hill since the end of the 19th century) and was only now beginning to figure in housing policy. It was not until 1980 that a formal allocation process was implemented, and also when the government began making serious attempts to unload ownership of the social housing stock and the problems it entailed with the Housing Act of 1980. This act gave tenants the right to buy as reduced market value rates, and proved immensely popular although it was sited to have lead to increase polarization of the population.

The primary mistake of state sponsored mass housing is that it produced and distributed houses strictly as a commodity good, not recognizing the home as a social base from which people lead their lives. This function of a home, as important as physical health and shelter from the elements, needs to be included in any housing scheme and work with the people in order to properly address their housing needs. Unlike an appliance or a car, a house cannot simply be moved if the parking spot is not desirable or if the car in the next space is too close – nor can it easily be traded in for something better with ease, especially for lower-income groups. A holistic approach must be employed to benefit the individual, the community, as well as the city at large.

Bibliography

Turner, J. (1976) Housing by People.