



■ MILES GLENDINNING

# ENNOBLING THE ORDINARY

## POSTWAR MASS HOUSING AND THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

This special issue is dedicated to postwar mass housing—a vast, dense, multi-faceted subject—whose relationship to the concerns of Docomomo, in both its history and its contemporary challenges, is about as complex and problematic as can be imagined. *Docomomo Journal 39* is intended as a second installment in the initiative by the International Specialist Committee on Urbanism and Landscape (ISC/U+L) to open up the subject of mass housing for debate within Docomomo, following our 2007 conference, 'Trash or Treasure' ([www.archi.fr/DOCOMOMO/docomomo\\_electronic\\_newsletter7.htm](http://www.archi.fr/DOCOMOMO/docomomo_electronic_newsletter7.htm)).

In one sense, there can be no more appropriate theme than mass housing for a special *Journal* issue to accompany a conference dedicated to the future of the modern movement's built legacy, as postwar housing is arguably the foundation of that legacy. Yet, at the same time, as we will see in the following pages, there can hardly be a theme more controversial and difficult for us to tackle.



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THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFICULTY presented by the subject of postwar mass housing for a modernist architectural heritage group such as Docomomo is not simply that it concerns a building type afflicted by large-scale redundancy and unpopularity. In the past, after all, conventional architectural conservation societies have been able to effectively address problems of mass obsolescence in pre-twentieth century building types as diverse as farms, churches or early workers' housing, without undue soul-searching. The relationship of these types to 'heritage' is a relatively detached one: they were designed a long time ago, at a time when 'architecture' was something added to the carcass of a building, in keeping with the Vitruvian segregation of aesthetic and practical aspects. Even building types once bitterly stigmatized as oppressive and unjust, such as nineteenth century factories or workhouses, can be re-appropriated relatively easily today.

THE POSITION with postwar mass housing could not be more different, with 'design,' 'production,' and 'reception' inextricably tangled together. Unlike old-style preservation societies, Docomomo is dedicated explicitly to a relatively recent architectural movement. Modernism voraciously launched itself outwards in all possible directions, discarding the old, stolid Vitruvian framework in favor of an all-embracing utopian approach. Time after time, from the 1920s to the 1970s, we witness claims by architects, both avant-garde and everyday, that architecture was indivisible from various social, economic, technological, or psychological factors—and that, because of that indivisibility, architects had the right and the duty to pronounce on and intervene in areas (such as structural engineering) they had previously avoided or which were newly invented (such as 'user studies'). Often, they called on the powerful mid-twentieth century state to help them in these efforts.

AT THE CORE of all these endeavors, especially in Europe and the wider Socialist bloc, was the new area of mass social housing. This was a field of the most burning political concern to twentieth century regimes of all hues, and at the same time a central focus of agitation to the socially-minded intelligentsia, including architects, city planners, sociologists, and public health reformists. Within this world, modernist architects set out to establish and enlarge their position through theories of community that aggressively invaded adjoining disciplines, especially that of town planning. Yet the outcome of those efforts was sometimes very different from the grandiose aspirations. These results were owed both to architects' often weak or marginal position within the establishment—by comparison, for example, with powerful industrial contractor organizations and local politicians dedicated to maximum output—and also to their lack of interest in communicating with and influencing these groups, rather than pursuing their own elite debates.

THE PARTISAN, contentious status of architectural modernism within mass housing was only reinforced when the phase of creation shaded into that of reception. In some places, such as



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Western Europe and North America, there was the further complication of a subsequent violent rejection by 'public opinion' of mass housing as a whole—a rejection that lumped together all its creators: 'sensitive' architects, mass-building contractors, engineers, and politicians. In those places, this rejection, and the consequent drastic surgical attacks by demolition or postmodern re-styling, has today left the often still substantial built legacy stranded in a fog of incomprehension, on the part both of the general public and of the new professional groups (mainly social housing managers and real estate capitalists) charged with the fate of that legacy. Yet in other places, such as the former USSR or the Asian Chinese city-states, a more consistent and all-embracing program of mass housing—often, however, involving a high degree of production—led standardization away from conventional concepts of architectural originality, and allowed a different, far less violently polarized outcome. Elsewhere again, for example in Brazil, large-scale mass building of apartment blocks was chiefly the work of the private sector, usually without the politicized fluctuations of fashion associated with some European housing programs.

THUS, it is no simple matter for an organization such as Docomomo, with its overwhelmingly strong allegiance to modernist architectural values, to embark on a 'reassessment of mass housing,' launching itself gaily into a battlefield of conflicting modes of reception within which almost any conceivable 'architectural' position is overburdened from the beginning with potential biases and limitations. Of course, it would be all too tempting for an organization of architects and architectural historians to try to shortcut this quandary by putting forward showy 'solutions' for the housing problem based on the supreme power of 'architectural quality.' The elitism of the original 1980s–1990s Docomomo love of the 'heroic interwar pioneers' (which originally denied postwar modernism was 'real MoMo' at all), could very easily be extended into the postwar period, showcasing elite housing designers who fought against supposedly prevailing mediocrity. One could then keep going into the present, picking out for praise the regeneration projects of present day 'iconic

modernist' designers. But the result of that would be a disastrous further layer of bias and confusion, not least in the way that the stylistic resemblances of 'MoMo housing past and present' obscure the disparity between today's profit-motives and the social-democratic values of yesteryear.

IN THE PRESENT SERIES of ISC/U+L initiatives, including *Docomomo Journal* 39 as well as 'Trash or Treasure?' and the Pilot U+L Inventory, our aspirations are more modest but hopefully more achievable and constructive. Taking our cue from the established Docomomo formula of documentation followed by conservation, as seen most recently in *Journal* 38 on Canada, the present issue of the *Journal* is structured under these two main headings.

THE FIRST SECTION, 'Documentation,' comprises two main groupings of papers. The first, 'International Survey,' contains a broad overview of the global diversity of the postwar mass housing legacy and its present-day problems, focusing particularly on case studies featuring forceful, large-scale building of high flats. It begins in the 'heartland' of social housing,



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Western Europe, with its mosaic of individualized policies and solutions, political and socio-architectural, some of which feature dramatic clashes between intellectually high-flown initial aspirations and extreme rejection or alienation on the part of inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

TO REPRESENT this approach, we take the specific case of Émile Aillaud's famous Les Courtilières development near Paris, in an article by members of the research group 'Pour une histoire du logement contemporain' (For a History of Contemporary Housing) that traces the project's vicissitudes at the hands of a plethora of municipal and other public agencies. At the opposite extreme of full-blooded standardization, Florian Urban's paper deals with the mass prefabrication programs of the post-Khrushchev era in the USSR. Here, paradoxically, although there was vast standardization and a drastic post-1991 economic polarization, especially in Moscow, the perpetuation of a wide social mix within the Soviet mass housing legacy means that it lacks the 'wholesale disrepute' of its western counterparts.

BUT BOTH 'EAST' AND 'WEST' in Europe were in agreement that housing was a matter of all-embracing community concern—a worldview not generally accepted in the Americas. There, social housing was a far less central concern of the state, and while straightforward public housing was often reserved for a residuum, the largest-scale developments were built by hybrid private-public or philanthropic agencies. Most famously is the case of New York City's gigantic middle-income 'Mitchell-Lama' and 'Title 1' housing projects of the 1950s–1970s, such as 'Co-op City,' 1965–72, with over 15,000 apartments in 35 towers of 24–33 storeys.<sup>2</sup> But intriguingly—as Graeme Stewart's paper shows—it was not in New York but in the planned townships of North America's 'other' metropolitan region (from 1954), Toronto, that the continent's private enterprise-dominated housing system, when coupled with a structure of strong regional planning dedicated to the fostering of high-density 'hot-spots' in the center and periphery, succeeded in generating a landscape of massed towers and slabs in open space, almost rivaling the USSR in consistency and grandeur.<sup>3</sup>

In South American countries such as Brazil, the private sector was yet more dominant, although, as Richard Williams describes in the case of the Brasilia superquadras, its operations could be reconciled at times with strong planning and architectural frameworks: his paper notes how Lucio Costa's renowned Pilot Plan, designated a World Heritage Site in 1987, has now taken on a somewhat 'museum-like character,' divorced from the mainstream of life and progress in the city.

BUT THE MOST EXTREME JUXTAPOSITIONS of capitalism and welfare-socialist housing occurred in those dynamic Asian city-states, Hong Kong and Singapore—the latter being the subject of Belinda Yuen's paper. From the late 1950s onwards, their free-enterprise economies were supported by colossal programs of state-planned mass housing, including both rental blocks and—more novel—publicly-built flats for home-ownership. Singapore's program, supported over half a century by a dirigiste government through a consistent range of fiscal incentives and strong regional planning, achieved consensual political support



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unequalled in any other twentieth century public housing program. Hong Kong has followed a more exciting and radically fluctuating course, with sharp swings in emphasis from rental to home-ownership and back again, and blocks of often gigantic scale.

THE SECOND GROUP of 'Documentation' papers, 'Inventorization and Recording,' considers the need for careful recording as a prelude to any conservation efforts. Here, too, a great diversity of approaches are available. As Diane Watters and Jessica Taylor's paper argues, the traditional approach of area-based, factual inventorization has received a great shot in the arm from the new, easy availability of digital databases and the simplicity of linking them to GIS frameworks. Their paper outlines a pilot recording initiative grounded in PhD research, and tied into both the Docomomo fiche inventorization philosophy and official government heritage survey work, as represented by the recording programs of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS). Mart Kalm's paper reports on an equally innovative strategy, in the Baltic region of Europe, of using international study grant programs to allow students to record the often vast relict landscapes of Socialist mass housing, focusing in this case on a boldly designed prototype collective farming settlement outside the town of Pärnu, Estonia. Stephen Cairns and Jane Jacobs relate how the adoption of unconventional, artistic-cum-poetic survey approaches can make possible bolder inventory strategies, comparing, for example, multi-storey slab blocks in Glasgow and Singapore. Their paper, along with those by Watters and Taylor, Gilroy, Pendlebury and Townshend, formed part of a joint recording seminar on 14 May 2008 in Edinburgh, organized by Docomomo ISC/U+L and RCAHMS, with support from the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Material from this seminar is available at [www.centenary.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.centenary.rcahms.gov.uk)

THE 'CONSERVATION' SECTION is also sub-divided into two groups of papers. The first focuses on approaches that emphasize preservation of entire areas of mass housing while

the second is orientated towards interventive, surgical solutions. In the first group, Vincent van Rossem outlines the Van Eesteren Museum project for a preserved microcosm within the post-1945 western extension areas of Amsterdam. Rose Gilroy, John Pendlebury and Tim Townshend outline a more extreme heritage preservation solution, comprising the 'listing' of an extensive and architecturally renowned complex of several thousand dwellings (multi-storey and low-rise) in northern England (Byker, Newcastle upon Tyne, by architect Ralph Erskine, 1969–82). The complication arises because the development's original intellectual concept included strong elements of user participation. The second group of 'Conservation' papers, all drawn from the Netherlands, is very different in approach. It emphasizes radical rebuilding solutions, in some cases for the 'Westelijke Tuinsteden' zone of Amsterdam but also for areas of Rotterdam, Groningen and Zwolle. Successive papers by Wouter Veldhuis, Arjan Hebly and Endry van Velzen demonstrate the great diversity of careful, sympathetic initiatives of housing regeneration in the 2008 Docomomo conference host country, the Netherlands.



CHIEFLY owing to the European location of the 2008 Docomomo conference, these conservation case studies are clustered un-representatively in one corner of the world. At first glance, it might seem that the global diversity of the mass housing phenomenon revealed in Part 1 must result in irreconcilable differences in conservation possibilities. What, for example, could the gently rotting prefabricated housing stock of a socio-economically redundant 1960s industrial town in Siberia have in common with the lovingly manicured living-heritage landscapes of setpiece northern European projects such as Tapiola or Roehampton? Or either of these with the frenzied pace and extreme site constraints of repeated redevelopment and renewal, ongoing today, in Hong Kong's rental housing?

YET THESE DIFFERENCES are not necessarily unbridgeable in practice: with time, echoes and resemblances begin to emerge in the most unlikely places. In Hong Kong, for example, the relentless flow of self-consuming housing progress, once happy to consign everything old not just to the scrapheap but to oblivion, is now slowed by the first islands of popular nostalgia. This is strikingly demonstrated in the 2005 project to preserve a specimen survivor of the city's first, elemental 'Resettlement' shelter blocks for fire-displaced squatters: the famous 'Mark 1' blocks of Shek Kip Mei.<sup>4</sup>

WITH THE GROWING RARITY/VALUE ratio that stems from the passage of time, even the worst collective psychological scars of enforced redevelopment can begin to heal. As previously occurred around 1960–1970, on a national rather than global scale, the once utterly reviled nineteenth century urban landscape of Europe suddenly became accepted as much-loved 'vernacular heritage.' Of course, the position of modernist housing is subtly different, given the confusing fact that 'modernist architecture' of a kind is once again dominant today. But even here, there are subtle differences that keep open the possibility of an effective distancing of the previous phases. The new 'iconic' modernism, in its insistence on front-and-back segregation of façades and spaces, and its flamboyantly individualistic

and anti-egalitarian styling, is subtly different in configuration from all the varieties of 'our' social mass housing. Wherever the latter occurs or survives, throughout the world, it serves as a reminder that there once existed an approach to city building that actively tried to reconcile the twentieth century forces of democratic collectivism and individualism, within a landscape that combined open-ended freedom with a restrained urban monumentality.

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#### NOTES

**1** See Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* (London: Yale University Press, 1994).

**2** Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson (eds.), *Robert Moses and the Modern City: the Transformation of New York* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 306–7.

**3** See also Michael McClelland, Graeme Stewart (eds.), *Concrete Toronto: a Guidebook to Concrete Architecture from the Fifties to the Seventies* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2007), 212–5.

**4** Cecilia Chu, 'Heritage of Disappearance? Shekkipmei and Collective Memory in Post-Handover Hong Kong,' *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, vol xviii, no. ii (2007): 43–55.



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p. 5, left to right. Rental 1970s housing in the Hong Kong New Towns: Tai Hing Estate, Tuen Mun New Town, six 30-storey cruciform blocks built 1977–8 by the HKHA; 1983 photo. / Prestige socialist housing in a 'new-old' capital: Block 23, Novi Beograd, Yugoslavia; 1982 view. / The Virgin Lands: newly completed low-rise Development Corporation flats in Glenrothes New Town, Scotland; seen in 1967. / Geometric planning in the Brezhnev era: 2006 view of one side of the grandly circular Väike-Oismäe development, Tallinn, Estonia (a 45,000-dwelling development built by the Eesti Projekt state agency from 1973 to the designs of architects M Port and M Meelak): the nearest block is the 9-storey Oismae tee 124.

p. 6–7, left to right. Leningrad Sublime: late 1970s multi-storey housing at Ulitsa Pionerstroy, Sasnovaya Polyana: in the foreground, seven 16-storey towers with 98 flats each. / Cutting the first sod at Co-Op City (see also next caption). / Philanthropic mass housing in the States: 1982 view of the vast Co-op City Development, Bronx, New York City: 15,373 dwellings in 35 cruciform blocks of 24–33 storeys, built as a limited equity cooperative in 1965–73 by the United Housing Federation at the instigation of New York's housing 'czar', Robert Moses. / Edge of the Empire: 1980s public housing and shopping centre at the NW edge of Ulan Bator, Mongolia; 1990 view. / National and municipal: the opening of the '10,000th house' built by Enfield Borough Council, a London outer suburb, in 1967, with the English Minister of Housing (Anthony Greenwood, second from right) and local politicians in attendance. / 1970s 'British-style' estate layout sign at HKHA's Ping Shek multi-storey estate, Kowloon, built from 1971; 1983 view.

p. 8–9, left to right. Zeilenbau no more? Glasgow Corporation's inner-suburban Sighthill development, ten 20-storey Crudens slab blocks built on a reclaimed chemical wasteground in 1962–9, and now slated for piecemeal demolition (beginning with the nearest block). / The Hong Kong public housing colossus in action: 1983 view of contract sign for a section of the HKHA's Sun Chui Estate, Sha Tin New Town—a mainstream rental development of tower and slab blocks. / Public housing palimpsest: redevelopment of Hong Kong's pioneering Mk 1 Resettlement estates (one-room emergency dwellings in 7-storey slab blocks) under way in 1983—here at Lei Cheng Uk, West Kowloon, with taller blocks rearing up behind. / Mikrorayon planning in the 'years of stagnation': 1983 view of layout sign, Marino housing development, Moscow. / The 'art' of public housing: 2006 view of the Danviksklippan project, on the southeast edge of Stockholm, a pioneering mid-1940s development of tower blocks in dramatic wooded landscaping. / The 'localisation' of socialist mass housing: 1980s 1-storey slab blocks at Nikolai-Kusnezow-Ring, Rostock-Schmarl, German Democratic Republic, showing the red tiled facing and stepped profile, intended perhaps to evoke the North German Backsteingotik tradition. / Pragmatic progress: 1983 view of a 1969s HKHA Mk IV Resettlement estate at Shek Pai Wan, Aberdeen, Hong Kong Island—by comparison with the Mk Is, a more 'advanced,' enclosed, highly serviced design, but still consisting essentially of one-room dwellings; all these estates have since also been redeveloped.

p. 10, left to right. Pride in Progress: page from brochure commemorating the 1968 opening by Prime Minister Harold Wilson of the '150,000 council house' built by Glasgow Corporation—a flat in a 26 storey point block at Springburn C.D.A. Area B. / Municipal grandiosity: Glasgow Corporation's Red road development (1,350 flats in eight blocks of 27–31 storeys), under construction in 1966, showing the idiosyncratic steel-framed and asbestos-clad building system. / Tenants' post boxes in the ground floor lobby of a newly completed tower block in Marino Area 14, Moscow; 1983 view.