

tower renewal project: plasticity revisited

Graeme Stewart

Stewart 'unpacks' the cultural status of now aged international style apartment blocks, and speculates on how technological restorations can lead to new architectures which shape new identities.



London



Chongqing



Moscow

I: The Reining Concrete Tower

In his introduction to the session 'Tower and Slab' at the 8th International Conference of the European Association of Urban History, Florian Urban of the Institute of Metropolitan Studies at TU-Berlin, states that the modernist concrete slab or tower in the park type apartment building, "is perhaps the most successful typology of the modern movement". Although having faced a contentious legacy, this opinion reflects the remarkably global scope of the implementation of the ubiquitous modern tower. From Soviet mass housing, European post-war reconstruction, North American urban renewal, the utopias of Brasilia and Chandigarh, and Hong Kong's super-blocks, this modernist machine for living is truly a global type, and has largely filled its mandate of providing well serviced and equitable housing for tens of millions of people.

The widespread adoption of the rationally constructed modern concrete tower in a 'park' or 'landscape' setting occurred in the context of housing shortages, central city over-crowding and tenement conditions of immediate post-war Europe. Reconstruction was not simply the process of rebuilding, but rather creating new societies, new democracies, and in the case of Britain, a new classless society in which the "mass unemployment and absolute poverty of the 1930s was impossible".¹ This strong idealism allowed for experimentation, and the acceptance of new modes of living. The modern concrete tower was the architectural and material response to these ambitions.

Offering modern amenities and conveniences, large suite sizes, as well as unobstructed access to light and air, outdoor community recreation space and 'breathing room' in the context of high-density multiple housing, the modern concrete tower was felt to be the housing model that combined the best standards possible with a responsible use of land and economic means of production.

Furthermore their regular forms and rational construction lent themselves to mass production and economies

of scale; rendering the equitable provision of modern housing within the reach of fledgling welfare states, for whom the 'housing question' was a pressing concern. Endorsed by architects, planners, sociologists, economists and even health reformists², the modern concrete tower became a new international benchmark.

The raw aesthetic became a symbol of stability and progress following the devastation of the war; divorced from both historical fussiness and elitism on one end, and tenement slums on the other, rational facades gave the promise of modernity, new lifestyles and a new world.

Lead in many respects by the planning innovations by the 'post-Corbusers' at the London County Council and their continental contemporaries, concrete mass housing schemes became of national significance to politicians and policy makers in Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and the world over; becoming the predominant mode of urban development for the next quarter century.

The tower block's fall from grace has been as epic as their original global dissemination. A focal point of the turmoil of social clashes of late 1970s, 80s and 90s, - and more recently the Paris riots, these aging concrete icons have entered a dubious position in the global collective conscious.

Much of the stigma assigned to these buildings in past decades is infused with notions of 'environmental determinism'; the belief that the buildings themselves have an innate and irreparable ability to negatively impact its inhabitants and surroundings. This perception was perpetuated as dogma for decades³, and was used to justify the mass demolitions of projects such as Chicago's Cabrini Green and St. Louis' Pruitt-Igoe.

Yet recently, this near mythical view of architecture's ability to influence behaviour has been challenged, both theoretically and empirically. Commenting on socially sensitive London council houses, Trevor Allen from the Commission of Racial Equity states; "It's not the build-



ings not done it". Perhaps environmental determinism has been overly focused on the buildings themselves, rather than the larger structural context contributing to lack of community cohesion, social capital, avenues for upward mobility, and generally low neighbourhood self esteem⁵. Following this logic, in the case of Pruitt-Igoe or Cabrini Green, it was the symbol of a social failure that was triumphantly demolished, not its root cause.

As discussed in Concrete Toronto regarding brutalism in general and Toronto's significant collection of concrete high-rise housing - we now suffer a cultural amnesia about this period; remaining critical yet uninformed about this architecture and leaving its very large impact on our environment without thoughtful assessment⁶. It is time to take a closer look.

As diverse as the geographies in which tower were implemented are the local responses and relationships to these structures. Encompassing, in some cases, opposing means of production, position in the housing market, ownership, maintenance histories, and purpose, this homogenous housing form exhibits divergent cultural meanings globally and even within urban zones.

While many of America's concrete towers continue to disappear, many of South America's have maintained the luxury status. Throughout Europe these buildings make up a considerable share of the housing market, and in many post-Soviet areas they make up the majority. While much of this stock is coincident with problematic social conditions, the slab housing conditions are in fact remarkably mixed and complex. In Western Europe this housing stock is predominantly used to assist the economically disadvantaged, while in Eastern Europe and Russia it enjoys incredibly mixed tenure and is home to a large percentage of the middle class. Throughout Europe, mixed ownership, massive scale redevelopment and liberalization of land use restrictions to encourage entrepreneurship have all been strategies in evolving and rendering apartment districts as functional housing for today's context.

Perceived usefulness of these buildings is tied to the cultural relationship to them. The associated value of yesterday's icons of progress is often simply a function of the effectiveness of stewardship.

This is reiterated by Hungarian planner C.K. Polonyi, in response to criticism of a modern housing estate he helped erect in Budapest in the 1970's. 'Originally', he states 'everyone hated the five story apartments which required the destruction of two story housing at the turn of the 20th century...now we call this the historic city'⁷. He feels the negativity of the modern blocks too will pass, and that their eventual legacy will be their effectiveness as quality housing, with every possibility of being as diverse and valued as the 'historic' variety.

We may in fact be experiencing the beginnings of a 'brutalist revival', or at least a revival of appreciation of the era's built form. As evident from Post-Soviet art exhibits⁸, Swedish designer bed sheets, Facebook groups, German 'Plattenbau' trading cards, the now iconic status of Goldfinger's Trelick tower (including themed designer dish set), and renewed valorization of local modern protagonists the world over, brutalism is experiencing resurgence as a topic of discourse and cultural production. (This book is an example).

This nascent renaissance of appreciation for the post-war housing is not surprising in the context of the past decade's resurgence of both high-rise living and modern design. However, a critical differentiator of today's 'marketable modernism'⁹, and our inherited post-war modern heritage, might be described as housing ethic. The reductionist aesthetic of the now ubiquitous 'brick on slab' may have improved profit margins for developers and housing associations, but was in keeping with the international housing ideal; meeting, and meeting best practices in housing standard through prudent and efficient means while effectively providing housing for hundreds of thousands. Although this led to a homogeneity, which ultimately resulted in the widespread rejection of the type, it was in a spirit of equality, or at

least perhaps equity, that housing standards were established, and the provision of affordable multiple housing was an aspiration of societies globally.

It is hoped that as legacies of modern housing gradually become issues of collective interest, a wider critical discussion of housing generally may emerge. Moreover, this emerging process of discovery of our modern legacy may help illuminate the genuine nature of our cities; revealing the human stories and immense human potential found within. Indeed, the monotonous facades of our modern towers conceal what Doug Saunders has termed our 'arrival cities'¹⁰ - unparalleled conglomerations of global diversity found in the outskirts of Paris and Amsterdam, East London, and the inner suburbs of Toronto - currently an issue of keen interest of Canada's National Film Board¹¹. The enormous cultural potential of these evolving communities has only just begun.

The pervasive presence of the concrete tower is a remarkable legacy of 20th Century mass production. As stated by Miles Glendinning in this introduction to Docomomo Journal 39, "[concrete towers] serve 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".¹² The negotiation of these relics with the quickly evolving 21st Century is brining new cultural production, architectures, and urbanisms. They indeed remain fundamental aspects of our evolving fabrics, and demand our thoughtful consideration.

1 Frederick Shaw. *The Homes and Homeless of Post-War Britain*. London: Parthenon Press, 1985. viii
2 Miles Glendinning. "Ennobling the Ordinary, Postwar Mass Housing and the Challenge of Change" Docomomo 39, Postwar Mass Housing. (Docomomo International, Paris: 2008) 6.
3 Interview: Dennis Sharp, Dennis Sharp Architects, Docomomo England, London, September 2006
4 Sanders, Doug. "The Blueprints of Urban Unrest" *The Globe and Mail*, October 2006.
5 Interview: Dennis Sharp, Dennis Sharp Architects, Docomomo England, London, September 2006.
6 Michael McClelland, Graeme Stewart. "Foreward". *Concrete Toronto: A Guidebook to Concrete Architecture from the Fifties to the Seventies*. (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2007). 12.
7 Cor Wagenaar. *Happy: Cities and Public Happiness in*

Post-War Europe. (NAi, 2005) 504.
8 Such as the 'Hotel Neustadt Installation' www.hotel-neustadt.de
9 Miles Glendinning. "Ennobling the Ordinary, Postwar Mass Housing and the Challenge of Change" Docomomo 39, Postwar Mass Housing. (Docomomo International, Paris: 2008) 10.
10 Doug Saunders. *Arrival City*. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2010
11 A glimpse was recently documented in the National Film Board's Thousandth Tower documentary, showcasing six residents in a dynamic tower community in suburban Toronto.
12 Miles Glendinning. "Ennobling the Ordinary, Postwar Mass Housing and the Challenge of Change" Docomomo 39, Postwar Mass Housing. (Docomomo International, Paris: 2008) 10.

II: Intervention / Innovation: Moving Forward

"..In Toronto...the continents 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 centre and periphery, succeeded in generating a landscape of massed towers and slabs in open space, almost rivalling the USSR in consistency and grandeur¹⁸."

Within the global tower diaspora of the modern tower block, Toronto, Canada is an interesting case. Between 1950 and 1980, more modernist slab apartments were built in Metropolitan Toronto than anywhere else in North America, particularly in its expanding suburbs. Promising a modern lifestyle and 'Jetsons' living, the modern tower became a symbol of progress to a young and confident nation experiencing rapid growth following the war. Aided by a strong planning regime concerned with integrating high density housing as a key component of suburban expansion, coupled with capable development companies, and an eager consumer base, nearly 2,000 modern concrete towers were built in the Toronto region during the post-war boom; many planned as satellite towns containing dense tower clusters on the periphery. Exhibiting a European typological and spatial approach to suburban mass housing, yet utilizing an American style free-market methodology for its implementation, Toronto exhibited a hybrid approach to post-war city building unique to the North American continent.

Collectively the Toronto region's concrete tower stock houses over one million people². However, for the past several decades, this distinguishing characteristic of modern towers and their neighbourhoods have garnered little attention in the City's collective consciousness.

This may soon change. Recent research exposing significant liabilities of this housing stock, including rapidly growing poverty and socio-economic polarization³, and poor building performance responsible for significant greenhouse gas production⁴, has brought this housing stock to the attention to urban planning and related cir-

cles. Tower Renewal, or Tower Neighbourhood Renewal, is an emerging response to these challenges, proposing significant reengagement of this modern heritage for social, environmental, and economic gain⁵ - and in the process provide a venue for architectural, landscape and urban innovation.

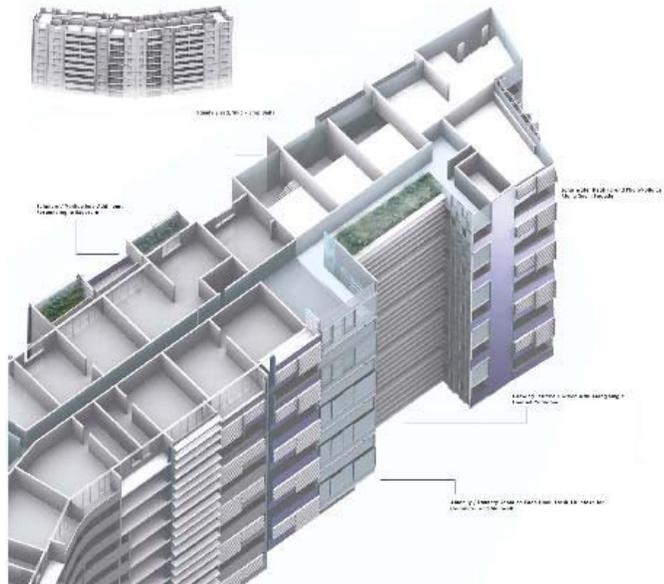
There is a risk, of course, that ill-conceived intervention will produce less than desirable results. Generally viewed as a regional liability, too often this modern legacy is often considered a problem to be fixed rather than foundations for positive revitalization and reinvestment. Without properly understanding the found condition, it is difficult to engage in a meaningful way. Reframing these buildings' position in the public's imagination is key to the ultimate success of any remediation strategy.

Global Condition and International Response

Throughout Europe, the community-building and carbon-cutting potential of these aging towers has been identified and has reached varying levels of actualization. Mixed ownership, massive scale redevelopment and liberalization of land use restrictions to encourage entrepreneurship have all been strategies in evolving and rendering apartment districts as functional housing for today's context. As Europe was highly influential in Toronto's adoption of modern towers as a strategy for suburbanization, recognition of their varied response to their continued relevance seems appropriate strategy.

In both Eastern and Western Europe, aging welfare state and Soviet-era towers have been exploited for their energy-saving potential to help achieve increasingly strict EU environment policies. One example is Bratislava, Slovakia. Here, the entire Petralka, a district south of the Danube River with hundreds of blocks built in the 1970s, is undergoing extensive environmental upgrades to meet new EU standards. Paid for in equal shares by the EU Commission of the Environment, the municipality and private investors (who gain develop-





ment rights on adjacent properties), the project is breathing new life into this aging district⁶. Projects of a similar scale are underway throughout the EU.

While too often these tower upgrades utilize aesthetically questionable re-clads, many are elegant, and a handful are remarkably comprehensive urban-investment projects worthy of emulation. In these examples, aging tower districts were completely reimagined through new infill development, public space and landscape upgrades. They have become popular neighbourhoods for young families; they include cultural facilities, markets and, in the case of London, even successful urban agriculture. Of particular note are the Bijlmermeer (Amsterdam, NL), Marzahn (Berlin, Germany), Swiss Cottage, (London, UK) and Topli Stan (Moscow, Russia).

New Architectures

"Different forms must be sought out, not for the sake of form - but to change the content of the forms - and this

will create new forms⁷." George Candilis, 1991

When walking through a modern tower block neighbourhood, one can't help but be struck by the sheer monumentality of these structures, the heroic statement of a by-gone era. They are Toronto's relics and most significant built heritage, poised to remain standing for several generations to come. The ambitious generative principles that led to the development of these modern planned communities remain relevant today. They offer a remarkable context for reengagement.

Close examination of these 'tower in the park' sites is in some senses like visiting a half completed project. It appears as a concrete frame with block walls on an expansive, though empty site, completely devoid of programme. Their inherent flexibility, both in building structure and site plan, suggest the opportunity for the reconfiguration of unit layouts, program elements, and ground plane spatial arrangements in response to evolving needs and contexts.

However they are far from a blank canvas. Superficially homogenous, each has incredibly unique neighbourhoods histories, and cultural specificity⁸. Opening these areas up for reengagement, while maintaining the integrity of social and cultural outcomes, will require the careful balancing of ecological, heritage, and community objectives. Engaging this significant modern legacy in a manner responsive to built and cultural heritage will provide an opportunity for significant new cultural production we well as new modes of architectural, urban, and landscape practice.

Building performance upgrades will dramatically reduce greenhouse gas production, as well as foster aesthetic innovation. Options include building overcladding, as explored in detail in the Tower Renewal Guidelines⁹ as well as complementary enhancements including, but not limited to district energy production, solar walls, and 'verticulture' installations. These sites can become a testing ground for any number of leading green approaches.

This form of reengagement provides an opportunity to build on modern principles and aesthetics; providing a foundation for new layers of formal responses to today's functional demands (from solar shading to waste chutes). As new modes of production, materials and functional requirements evolve, the aggregate of this reengagement will lead to new architectures.

Engaging surrounding open space to address evolving neighbourhood programs provides an opportunity for innovation in site planning and urban organization at both the immediate site and neighbourhood scales. Rather than rejecting the original site intentionality outright, this reengagement can lean heavily on a rich modern tradition from Roehampton's picturesque landscape to the human scaled urbanism of Bakema's Lijnbaan in the Rotterdam city centre¹⁰ which, containing small shops, cafes and cinemas, is, according to Mumford, 'exemplary in almost every way'¹¹. Similar principals were also used in Sweden's seminal Vällingby, which

created a public commercial centre of great intimacy within a satellite housing project consisting largely of high blocks.

Without resorting to historicism or anti-modern rhetoric, these successful examples of modern planning point to integrating an expanded modern canon into the interventions of our aging modern districts. Similarly, in engaging the landscape, 'place making' and productive landscape can bring a renewed relevancy to the 'tower in the park'.

What may ultimately become the most achievable, and ultimately be the most significant interventions, may be the 'informal architectures' created through the simple liberalization of land use controls. Enabling what Giancarlo de Carlo might consider 'liberating operations of disorder'. This is indeed that case in tower sites across Eastern Europe and Russia, where the proliferation of individual actors has given former dead zones a 'carnavalesque' atmosphere and enhanced community and commerce, resulting in remarkable new forms of ready-made urbanism in the context of aging concrete towers.

At the regional scale, numerous global examples demonstrate that carefully retrofitted, post-war apartment districts can emerge as hubs for community activity, energy and food production, waste management, transport, growth, and service delivery; providing cost effective services and resource networks for the community, the City and region as a whole. Applied comprehensively, thoughtful reengagement can have a significant impact on consumption, travel patterns, resource management, green house gas production, and most importantly, foster vibrant, equitable and diverse communities throughout the region.

Modern Heritage and the Next Toronto:

Buildings go through cycles, at least one's relationship to them does. This is evident in the shift of the Victorian urban landscape from 'utterly reviled' to a 'much loved vernacular heritage'¹² that took place during the 1970s, and is perhaps in the early stages for Toronto's post-war concrete building stock.

Toronto's famous rejection of modernism, has for better or worse defined much of its collective urban psyche – or cultural myth – for the past quarter century. As we once again are faced with the need to embark on large scale regional planning exercises to ensure a continued

high-quality of life and economic prosperity, the intrinsic value of our modern legacy becomes apparent, born of similar conditions 40 years ago.

Perhaps our acceptance, and reappropriation of this far larger modern heritage, will define our notion of our post-war cities, and their relevancy in an increasingly shifting world, in the decades to come.

Graeme Stewart of E.R.A. Architects, is the co-editor of *Concrete Toronto: A Guidebook to Concrete Architecture from the Fifties to the Seventies*, and is a key initiator of the Tower Renewal Project, an initiative in modern heritage for a greener and more equitable Toronto.

1 Miles Glendinning. "Ennobling the Ordinary, Postwar Mass Housing and the Challenge of Change" *Docomomo 39, Postwar Mass Housing*. (Docomomo International, Paris: 2008) 7.

2 Graeme Stewart, Jason Thorne, *Tower Neighbourhood Renewal in the Greater Golden Horseshoe*. Toronto: Government of Ontario, 2010.

3 For more information of Toronto's growing economic disparity, see: David Hulchanski. *The Three Cities Within Toronto: Income Polarization among Toronto Neighbourhoods, 1970-2000*. Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, 2007

4 For more information of Toronto's high-rise energy performance, see Ted and Ivan Saleff. *Differential Durability, Building Life Cycle and Sustainability*. 10th Conference on Building Science and Technology, Ottawa, Canada. May 2005

5 For a full account of the advantages and opportunities of Toronto's modern concrete towers, please refer to the Mayor's Tower Renewal Opportunities Book, 2008, and the University of Toronto's Tower Renewal Guidelines, 2009.

6 Interview: Dr. Slachta, Head City Architect, Bratislava, September 2006.

7 "The difference between good and bad" Team 10: In Search of a Utopia of the Present. Ed: Max Risselada and Dirk van den Heuvel. Rotterdam: NAI.

8 See David Bexmzgis. *Natasha and Other Stories*. Toronto: Frarrar, Straus and Grioux, 2004.

9 *Tower Renewal Guidelines*. Ed: Ted Kesik and Ivan Saleff, Daniels Faculty of Architecture at the University of Toronto, CMHC

10 Regean Legeault. *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Post War Architecture and Culture*. (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2000).

11 Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*. (New York: Harcourt, 1961) 459.

12 Miles Glendinning. "Ennobling the Ordinary, Postwar Mass Housing and the Challenge of Change" *Docomomo 39, Postwar Mass Housing*. (Docomomo International, Paris: 2008) 9.

