



Editorial

Mass housing of the Scandinavian Welfare States. Exploring histories and design strategies

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Publication date:
2020

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:
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Citation for published version (APA):
Riesto, S., & Glendinning, M. (2020). *Editorial: Mass housing of the Scandinavian Welfare States. Exploring histories and design strategies*. University of Edinburgh.

'Mass Housing in the Scandinavian Welfare States: Exploring Histories and Design Approaches' by Miles Glendinning (Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies, University of Edinburgh) and Svava Riesto (University of Copenhagen)

Mass housing is an almost omnipresent feature of modern cities, at any rate within the 'Global North'. Countless people in many countries across the globe live in large-scale housing schemes, built for a large number of residents according to a comprehensive plan. An invention of the 20th century, mass housing estates relate to modern ideas of progress, growth, technological invention and improving people's housing conditions. Yet, in Europe, where the realization of large-scale developments peaked during the 1950s-1970s, mass housing has also become a legacy of the past, associated with historical failure, outdated architectural ideals and social segregation. Simultaneously, post-war housing projects are increasingly connected to discussions about how to renovate, renew and reconnect modernist urban areas in the city in sustainable, resilient and just ways. The stigma and polarized perceptions of social housing areas in the public debate call for more nuanced understandings of large-scale housing estates. This, we argue, should involve a closer understanding of their histories, present situations and future scenarios.

Focusing on examples from Denmark and Sweden, two countries often associated with a strong welfare state system, the articles in this volume are concerned with the dynamic histories of mass housing, including their contemporary everyday cultures, materialities and future reconfiguration.

All over Europe today, there are countless projects to rebuild, renew, destroy, densify, re-evaluate

and transform mass housing schemes, underlining the need for substantiated ways of dealing with this often conflicted heritage. The significance of this task is reflected in the decision to give the prestigious Mies van der Rohe award for architecture twice in recent years to projects that renovated postwar developments; (Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam, 2017, and the French Grand Parc, Bordeaux, in 2019) and that postwar mass housing has been addressed in several of the most recent Venice Biennales of Architecture. Yet, although some estates and renewal projects have been elevated into these culturally elite domains, most transformation projects of post-war mass housing are driven by political, technological or economic rationales in ways that leave little room for thorough investigation of the dynamic histories, social values and spatial capacities of each particular housing project. Further, the market-driven policies and financialisation of space in European cities reinforce the need for strategies to address urban housing beyond profit. How can cultural historical inquiry, critical heritage perspectives, landscape architectural and architectural scholarship contribute more nuanced ways of understanding post-war mass housing to provide a knowledge-base for future care and decision-making?

This question was the starting point for the seminar *Researching Mass Housing*, organized at the University of Copenhagen's department of Landscape Architecture and Planning in November 2018, in collaboration with DOCOMOMO-International's Specialist

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Committee on Urbanism and Landscape (ISC U + L). It focused on two Scandinavian countries, whose welfare state systems combine market-driven and social economies, but with distinct housing outcomes 'on the ground'. Each in their own way, Sweden and Denmark constitute examples of how welfare state policies and regulations in the post-war period supported large housing schemes, in Sweden with the mass production drive of the so-called 'Million-Programme' of the late 60s and early 70s, concerned with the ideal of the 'people's home', and in Denmark with the establishment of a comprehensive social housing sector – resulting in a large housing stock that faces new challenges in the present. Each Scandinavian nation followed very different models of housing, together with a continuous testing and debate between different architectural, urban and landscape models, all aiming to accommodate social welfare, individual well-being, and - increasingly – wealth. Although it is outside the scope of this event, postwar social housing provision in the other Scandinavian and Nordic countries (Norway, Finland, Iceland) shows the same picture of great diversity in the realisation of the ideal of 'welfare state mass housing', both organisationally and in built form.

A common thread in the articles of this volume is the refusal to countenance generic methods and fixed value-systems, which fail to grasp the specificities of each situation and depth of the topic. Rather, each in their own way, the articles pose questions that can unravel Scandinavian mass housing from different perspectives, and

adjust the research strategies to those questions. Thus, the authors aim to augment our knowledge of the concepts, heuristic strategies and research approaches that can effectively be put to use in addressing postwar mass housing in fruitful ways. Two interrelated topics provide common threads throughout this publication: redirecting historical narratives, and exploring design strategies to intervene in post-war mass housing in the present.

Thread 1: Redirecting historical narratives

The first topic concerns the historical understanding of Scandinavian mass housing. Realizing that historiography and narration play an important role in how urban areas are understood, contextualized and assessed in the present, it becomes crucial to expand, and even redirect the historiographies and public understanding of mass housing. What historical research trajectories can be fruitful to expand the historical narratives of Scandinavian mass housing?

Historian Mikkel Høghøj proposes to interrogate how concrete mass housing became stigmatized almost right from its first construction, and thereby provides a starting point for unravelling and reversing the stigma. While the construction of this history has been subject to international studies, Høghøj contributes a detailed insight into how the polemical turn-around against mass housing took effect within Danish culture during the 1970s and 1980s. His article shows that the idea of failed concrete housing blocks not only emerged as a result of shifting architectural ideals, but that that

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the critique was also tied to the re-negotiation of the very idea of the 'human subject' and 'social order' in the Danish welfare state.

The paper by Miles Glendinning expands the scale of examination of the relationship between welfare and mass housing beyond the national or European scale, into a broad global narrative with a myriad of social, political and architectural differences, varieties and complexities. On this broad foundation, he contextualises the Scandinavian experience. Often reduced to the 'silo thinking' of self-contained national narratives, this paper contributes a new, global perspective. While different countries and regions around the world attached radically different values to mass housing, in Scandinavia it was closely tied to those countries' welfare states, and their prevailing 'universal welfare model'. Although the Scandinavian approach did not reach the utopian scale and belief in top-down planning on the largest scale seen in the Soviet bloc, the same values were still prominent, and tied to an enormous improvement of living standards.

Landscapes were considered an essential value in the planning and design of large-scale housing estates in Scandinavian in the post-war decades, yet are today surprisingly understudied, and too often escape further enquiry or discussion in contemporary renewal projects. The paper by the interdisciplinary research team, Ellen Braae, Svava Riesto, Henriette Steiner and Anne Tietjen, proposes to build a new and closer understanding of the landscapes of large-scale housing estates

of the postwar period, by introducing the concept *welfare landscapes*. By revisiting the open spaces of specific housing estates in Denmark built between 1945-1975 the authors examine the ideas about well-being and welfare that these welfare landscapes materialise, and how they change over time together with changing conceptions, ideas and uses. Reappraising welfare landscapes and developing approaches to understand their dynamic histories is crucial to enhance their capacities to thrive as viable welfare landscapes in the future. In doing so, the authors see welfare landscapes as potential collective values in the present and future - a theme which ties into the second thread.

Thread 2: Exploring design approaches

How can designers fruitfully intervene in mass housing in ethical ways? What roles can architects and planners hope to play in such dissonant terrain? By examining two particular housing estates from Sweden, which have not previously been much discussed in international literature, two authors develop concepts to discuss possible positioning for architects, landscape architects and planners working with mass housing, resisting the pressure for comprehensive building, demolition or other physical surgery to 'fix' problems that characterizes many urban projects.

Focusing in particular on the example of Fittja, Thordis Arrhenius proposes new and experimental ways of conceiving area preservation, beyond the intense focus on the canonical or the

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tabula rasa, expanding its scope to a deeper and at the same time more strategic and wide-ranging level. Studying the work of design studio Spridd, Arrhenius identifies a strategy of 'change without change', a concept that aspires to change the public perception of Fittja rather than to introduce big physical changes. Their work was centred around opening the estate's history and future to public discussion. Arrhenius conceptualizes this as a preservation-practice that can demonstrate the political force of preservation, moving the focus from authenticity and materiality to issues of sustainability and resistance.

Heidi Kajita, in her contribution, proposes a new concept, that of *Yonder* - a catchphrase drawn from novelist Siri Hustvedt, and denoting the idea of 'between here and there'. With this concept, Kajita seeks to stimulate planners and architects, working together with users, to begin grasping in parallel the 'both-and' situation of the mass housing architecture and of their own work. In the case of Drottninghög, a large-scale housing project in Helsingborg, she identifies new practices of future-making that concern repair more than progress. Yonder practice supports and 'pushes forward' relationships, and generates knowledge in the form of thinking and discussion – instead of mere design and production of objects. The article calls for a more cautious and nuanced approach, dedicated to pushing forward the social question in a slow transformation of postwar mass housing.