

“ ‘Architect-Designed’: Concepts of Quality and Quantity in English Mass Housing”**by Stefan Muthesius** (University of East Anglia)

The term “architect-designed” will, I assume, puzzle some who are less familiar with the English scene. Does not every house, like every building, have to be designed by an architect? In England the situation is somewhat different: the vast majority of dwellings of most types were not designed by an architect. What that precisely means is: the designer of the house or of a number of houses, or of a block of flats, is not known, or it would take a very hard search to find out. Few would actually want to know, and the person who designed the dwelling would not want to come forward in order to receive credit for the design, as an architect. These dwellings would simply not be considered architecture, *sensu strictu*.

So who designed those dwellings? It was the builder or the contractor, or the in-house designer of the construction company, or even the supplier of some of the building’s components, such as the décor on the front. If the building was built earlier on in the 20th century by a local council the designer most likely called himself - hardly ever herself - an engineer. Of course that engineer would know much about design and construction, but the term engineer appeared appropriate because, again, the building would generally not be reckoned to count as “architecture”.

What has to be made clear at this point is that there is usually nothing to be said against the building quality of the homes. As regards solidity and practicality these buildings appeared at least ‘satisfactory’. ‘Architecture’ clearly is what comes under the third Vitruvian heading: Beauty. The first two headings are firmly subsumed under

“building”. The practice and theory of architecture in Britain was indeed tied very closely to Classical and Renaissance formulae which were adopted from the 17th century onwards.

From about 1800 the ideal of classical regularity was supplemented by another aesthetic ideal, the picturesque. It now seemed even more imperative that a building’s design should come from an architect. It was also the architect who was the only agent deemed capable of understanding the new science of historically defined styles, and that included any kind of “modern” style. The 19th century’s most influential architect and architectural writer, Augustus Welby Pugin, firmly believed in Gothic as well as in picturesqueness and condemned all Classical design. For him this meant that everything that looked regular, repetitive was held in contempt. Even more significant was the way Pugin saw the architect as a provider of the psychic well-being of society. The architect could become a person of the highest moral authority; by contrast, ‘building’, and especially mass building could be seen only as a degrading activity. There was one further factor in Pugin’s system of values. The buildings Pugin condemned were mostly those built in a utilitarian fashion in his own day. It was these modern kinds of buildings, such as the new utilitarian-shaped workhouses, which, according to Pugin, made people unhappy. It is old buildings that have the opposite effect.

The history of the built fabric of England could from now on neatly be divided between the two spheres, architecture and building. The latter would include

“‘Architect-Designed’: Concepts of Quality and Quantity in English Mass Housing”by **Stefan Muthesius** (University of East Anglia)

the vast majority of dwellings in the urban scene. If these are new or newish, they are likely to be held in contempt, but if they can be considered old, they might be cherished. From the later 19th century onwards one needs to differentiate two categories within building: there is new building which is at best uninteresting, at worst condemnable, and there is old building which is given the epithet vernacular and which can be cherished. The latter category forms the third major heading used in judging the built environment. From time to time the vernacular makes a come-back, and it may happen that these earlier kinds of building, of non-architecture, are valued above architecture. This was the case of the terraced house which was set against the disliked tower block from the late 1960s. Architecture, new building and vernacular, these are the three major headings under which the fabric of the country is classified and judged and which are, or were, interlocked in a constant dialectical game.

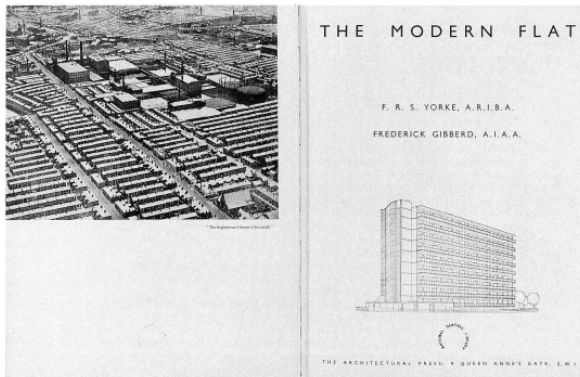
Now Pugin voiced his concern for the poor and disadvantaged in that he designed a model workhouse, but he was not yet concerned with designing mass housing. During the second half of the 19th Century mass housing, and the perception that most of what had been built, and what was being built, was bad, became an enormous issue, dubbed the ‘housing problem’. Around 1900 the architect-minded designer decisively entered that field, by way of joining the social policy makers and by setting up a new science of the overall planning of districts of towns, or whole new towns, i.e. ‘town planning’. The architect Raymond Unwin combined his new methods

of laying out towns and suburbs with designing all classes of houses, including small cottages, in a vernacular style. He quickly became famous for that in Europe and in the USA, too. Just as architecture was being opposed to building, town planning was now opposed to the mere ad-hoc extensions of towns, that is, the careful, multidisciplinary planning of a town or an estate, combining technical with cultural values, was opposed to the mere technical and administrative laying out of a new district by adding street after street. Most of the advanced architects of the 20th century prided themselves in acting as advanced town planners as well.

By including low-income dwellings in their design activity, architects effectively had entered the sphere of mass-building. It was a completely new phenomenon; it also led to a new dialectic of praise and condemnation, a repetition of sequences whereby a type of housing was proudly introduced by an architect or a group of practitioners. After a few decades, when the model had been repeated all over the country in large numbers, architectural critics and often the general public as well, turned against the type. When, during the 1930s, a vast number of low density suburbs were laid out in a fashion reminiscent of Unwin’s town planning, and several million houses were built that at least vaguely resembled Unwin’s picturesque designs - all of it happening because suddenly these dwellings had become affordable to a wide segment of society - the opinion of the architectural establishment turned against these developments and declared them, in the way Pugin condemned his contemporary buildings, as detrimental to soul

“‘Architect-Designed’: Concepts of Quality and Quantity in English Mass Housing”

by Stefan Muthesius (University of East Anglia)



The ‘bad old’ and ‘good new’: title page and frontispiece from Yorke and Gibberd’s ‘The Modern Flat’, 1937

and taste. By the 1940s architects and town planners had taken a dislike of the suburb as such, especially the outer suburb with its low density spread of individual houses.

This pattern of invention and rejection affected virtually all types of dwellings. This leads one to stress, more basically, that there is probably no other country in which there appear so many distinct types of dwellings, each distinguished by its label, a label which virtually everybody in the country is familiar with: terrace, semi-detached, detached, bungalow, blocks of flats of various kinds, tower block etc. No other country, it may be claimed, puts so much stress on the distinctiveness of the various types of dwellings. In the USA we would also note vast divisions between the major types of dwellings, but these types remain steady in their evaluation. The pattern of praise and contempt occurred most strongly with the most prominent of all types, the terrace of houses: they were “invented” by the top architects in the 17th and 18th centuries, practised in vast quantities during the later 18th and the 19th centuries, but then held in contempt from the later 19th to

about the 1960s, to be finally (so far) revived by 1970-80.

What one has to take into account here is that all these judgments could spread because of an extremely well-oiled publicity machine, comprising the specialised professional press as well as the newspapers. By the Interwar years illustrations of buildings and environments, whether photographed or drawn in various ways, had reached a very high degree of competence. After WW III these pictorial methods reached ever higher degrees of perfection. This included ways of demonstrating, by adopting satirical ways of drawing, how “bad” a building could look, a method already mastered by Pugin.

Mass housing in England now formed a complex conundrum, and especially so among the architectural circles of London. The architect, or at any rate, a number of distinguished members of the profession, felt compelled to follow their social conscience and embarked on the design of mass dwellings. Like Pugin, they were convinced that their designs were not only satisfactory in practical terms, but that they were also beneficial in a much wider socio-psychological sense. What architects mostly did not care for was cost. However, when, after a while, say, after two, or even after barely one decade, their type of housing and their style of architecture was taken up by builders or the “building industry” on a larger scale, and when there were claims of achieving cost saving, the architects and their mouthpieces, that is the architectural journals, began to condemn the type.

“‘Architect-Designed’: Concepts of Quality and Quantity in English Mass Housing”

by Stefan Muthesius (University of East Anglia)

Thus a summary of the municipal tower block in England (and also, to a lesser extent, in Scotland) runs like this: the type was promoted by architects and town planners from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s, rejected by some architects and planners already from the late 1950s and then widely condemned from the late 1960s to the 1990s. Here the period of first widespread rejection, say around the mid 1960s, coincided with the period in which many of the blocks were still being constructed. In terms of planning this might be expressed as a process starting from the already mentioned dislike of the spread-out low density suburbs to a demand for greater density – while keeping as much greenery, that is public greenery, as possible – and then a turn away from concentrated-dwelling-plus-greenery concept towards the Victorian evenly spread medium density pattern with mainly private greenery.

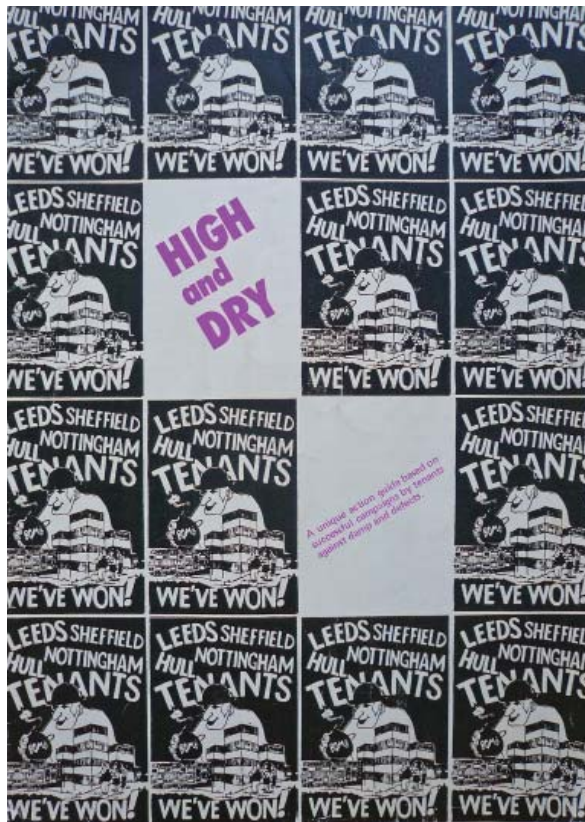
What general explanation can be offered for this pattern of constant chopping and changing? Once more, probably the most plausible reasoning is related to the presence of an artistic-creative frame of mind which happens to also be flattering itself that it is helping to solve burning “social problems” (one only needs to remember Le Corbusier’s last words in his *Vers une architecture: ‘architecture or revolution’*). When the same architect, or his or her circle of professionals, then took note of what others did when using the same type, and by others they mean those who do not belong to the architectural profession, then the creators of the type begin to lose faith in it. This reasoning can be formulated in stricter Marxian terms as the workings of ideology: an apparent

solution to the “social problem” is proposed and even partly realised, but its promoters are in the end unable to step out of the confines of their own elevated social class. A much simpler explanation could also be tried: nobody likes the look of mass housing, or any kind of architecture, that is designed repetitively.

In actual fact, the process of creation and condemnation in the 1940s and 50s was a little more complicated. In the first post-war decade public housing was virtually the only field of activity available. For that very reason architects were literally forced to concern themselves with it. The years during the War were the time when the most ambitious plans were drawn up for a future England, and the planning of towns and of housing played a crucial role in this process. The years after 1945 witnessed a sequence of the strongest pronouncements by the critics, for and against types of housing. The condemnation of the older terraces of houses, the common “semi” and even the bungalow, actually an especially popular type in those years, had become routine. By 1950 there were already new targets: J.M.Richards, the editor of the *Architectural Review*, launched an attack on some very recent medium-rise blocks of flats, of a modern look with much glass and flat roofs; yet to the architectural elite they now looked “ a workman-like application of the functional routine by a borough engineer” . It was the same J.M.Richards who during the earlier 1940s had been a fervent advocate of precisely that “purely functional” International style Modernism. An attack followed in 1953, entitled “Prairie Planning”, on the low density of the new post WW II

“‘Architect-Designed’: Concepts of Quality and Quantity in English Mass Housing”

by Stefan Muthesius (University of East Anglia)



Cover of a publication by the Yorkshire Development Tenants Action Group, 1981

New Towns, which were just at that time nearing completion. These towns were the pride of the town planning avant-garde and enjoyed international fame, but to the architectural critics they looked dull. Not only the older kinds of suburban housing but the whole concept and practice of the suburb, of the low-density outer suburb, became suspect and suffered numerous vilifications.

Architects always had to appear ahead of the game. ‘National British’, or, at any rate, London architecture became dominated by an internationally orientated avant-garde. It seemed the time for radically new models. In 1950 the London County Council greatly strengthened its Architects’ Department and filled it with the most ardent young

Modernists, whose first major proposal was the never-before-seen point block of over 10 storeys. By the late 1950s the number of storeys rose to 20, to reach 30 by the mid –sixties. For the British designers this was not just a matter of importing models from abroad, but the way in which the estates were extensively landscaped was taken as proof of an English picturesque adaptation of Modernism. The model that was more literally imported from the Continent was the slab block of Gropius and Le Corbusier origin. Both types, point block and slab block were placed side by side in London’s most celebrated estate at Roehampton. In the 1960s point blocks and slab blocks were sometimes combined.

On the whole, English tower blocks came in a very considerable variety, in fact, apart from a relatively small number of estates using prefabricated “Plattenbau” kinds of systems, no two groups of blocks are alike. Overall, the great number of tower blocks were an astonishing factor in a country where, for most dwellers, the low-rise suburban house and garden was still the preferred solution. “Architect-designed” is thus an apposite characterisation.

A model that ran alongside the exclusive urban tall block, one that constituted a planning solution as much as an architectural one, was Mixed Development. This combined houses, “walk-up” flats and high flats to meet more specifically the differing demands of large families, small families and single people. By the mid sixties this was, however, on its way out, a victim of the demise of the tower block. The reference to “people”, to

“‘Architect-Designed’: Concepts of Quality and Quantity in English Mass Housing”

by Stefan Muthesius (University of East Anglia)

the users, also emerged in the plans of a new, more radical group, headed by Peter and Alison Smithson: as they saw it, the architect's task was not only to provide the well-appointed individual dwelling, a house or a flat, but also to plan for the links between the individual dwellings. This group now rejected the slim, high point block as an environment that risked isolating people; instead there should be as much linkage between them, to be achieved by prominent “streets in the air” linking groups of blocks. Sheffield Park Hill is the outstanding example of this approach. By the early to mid-sixties some councils, especially in South London, gave up the high blocks altogether and pursued “High Density - Medium Rise” (up to 4 storeys), culminating in the most complex kinds of agglomerations of ‘houses’, i.e. maisonnettes, and flats, linked by immensely complicated systems of walkways.

Then, during the mid to late 1960s, the time seemed to have arrived for a major “crunch”: a fierce attack, one may have predicted it, after the series of attacks witnessed before, on what had just been built, what had in many cases just been opened, or was actually still building. This was a crisis of all high rise solutions. It rapidly grew into a crisis of confidence regarding the whole of the great project of postwar British council house building. In the early 1950s the Architectural Review and its sister publication, the Architect's Journal had greeted the tower block enthusiastically, but in 1968 the same journals sounded its death-knells. The architects thereby tried to shift the blame, as in previous situations, to the building industry, as having ‘taken over’ and debased the

type, as having taken it out of the hands of the architects. What was new was that the critical audience had widened, to comprise journalists in the major dailies and Sunday newspapers who in turn purported to speak for the population at large.

The implications were even more serious: the very tag “architect-designed” was now under attack. The principal target was what was felt to be the hubris of that profession, and with it that of the town planners, too, extending to all the other officials of the municipality. All of them were guilty. Acting in mutual reinforcement with the politico-economic shift against mass housing and public housing, the result was that the building of council housing as a whole was greatly reduced and as regards the battle of housing types, the suburban terraced house was revived, the of house which had received the greatest amount of condemnation only a few decades before.

Housing fashions and architectural preconceptions had turned full circle. Mass housing designed by architects seemed a thing of the past. It was back again to the speculative developer, as in the 19th century and in the 1930s. Nobody remembered any more how the architects and planners who championed high blocks in the 1940s and 50s had believed that they finally conquered all “bad” non-architects’ designed houses, and that, around 1945, there had been plans to demolish virtually all smaller Victorian terraced houses.

In conclusion: England was the country in which there was most debate about mass housing, where several of the most frequently met types of mass housing originated, and where we witness

“‘Architect-Designed’: Concepts of Quality and Quantity in English Mass Housing”
by Stefan Muthesius (University of East Anglia)

the greatest effort to assign a purely architectural character also to the dwelling of ‘ordinary’ people and even the lower classes. Each type was first propagated by the architects and their spokespersons with the utmost conviction; it appeared to be invented by the architect, who was convinced that it would create the utmost happiness and contentment. After a few decades, when great numbers of the type had been built it was liable to go out of favour, and even be condemned; then, the architects and their spokespersons advocated a new type, or possibly even a revival of the old type on whose condemnation the new type had been built.

Since about 1970-1980, these major shifts and reversals seem to have come to an end; today we would not really condemn spread-out suburbia, nor a concentration of high blocks, but we would cite advantages for both ways of living. What remains from the past in English mass housing is certainly a diversity not seen anywhere else, a diversity of pronounced shapes on the ground and a diversity of arguments in words and pictures.