

“Introductory global overview of the issues of mass housing as ‘heritage’; outline of key issues for discussion” by Miles Glendinning (Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies, University of Edinburgh)

Welcome to the main day conference session of this DOCOMOMO International/EAHN Conference on Modern Mass Housing: East and West. I would like to begin by explaining a little about the origins and purpose of this event. Both EAHN and DOCOMOMO have had a longstanding interest in researching and documenting the mass housing legacy of the postwar decades in Europe, especially in relation to their potential status as heritage; and when it transpired that EAHN’s 2011 Annual Tour was to be held here in Scotland, we thought it would be a great opportunity to add on to it an event dedicated specially to modern mass housing.

From the perspective of the Urbanism and Landscape Committee of DOCOMOMO-International, whose task is to expand DOCOMOMO’s work beyond individual elite monuments to the wider built environments of modernism, social housing several years ago was identified as a key testing ground for this shift in the scope of modern heritage, and we organised a succession of events to review the state of play in both of DOCOMOMO’s main areas of activity, documentation and conservation (DO-CO-MOMO). These included a 2007 Conference, ‘Trash or Treasure’, and a special September 2008 issue of the DOCOMOMO Journal on modernist mass housing. Today’s symposium builds further on this foundation.

One initial challenge at these events was, or is, to agree definitions of our subject. That task is further complicated by the communication issues

raised in any multi-national, multi-lingual initiative. In the English language alone, there are a mass of terms that mingle politico-social and architectural definitions of our subject - mass housing, public housing, social housing, council housing, housing scheme, project, estate, multi-storey, tower blocks, deck access, flats, high rise, system building and so on and so on. And other languages are in the same position. In DOCOMOMO, we have tried to circumvent this definition difficulty through a pragmatic, albeit complex, working definition of modern mass housing for the purpose of our Urbanism/Landscape initiatives: that is, large-scale housing programmes backed in some way or another by the state, and whose built form usually involves large aggregates of buildings laid out in the diverse ways allowed for in the modern movement.

In order to build on the previous housing-related DOCOMOMO events, we didn’t want today’s event to just repeat generalities, but to focus on more specific issues. We’ve identified two issues in particular.

First, the issue of methodology, and specially the relationship between documentation and conservation – the two poles of DOCOMOMO’s work. Does the sheer scale and controversial connotations of postwar social housing complexes make it impracticable to preserve them in any systematic or meaningful way? If so, then as we saw at RCAHMS yesterday, can the heritage emphasis shift decisively to recording and documentation – not as a preliminary to preservation but instead

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of it? And if so, in what form? Do modern electronic and GIS methods now make it practicable to attempt comprehensive database or inventory initiatives, or are more ad-hoc, fragmentary approaches dictated by the sheer scale, or the radical multiple reworkings, of the surviving environments?

In the 1980s, in the pre-computer age, it was possible to produce a comprehensive printed A2 size atlas of social housing in Amsterdam, and something similar was attempted for the UK in the book Stefan Muthesius and I produced in 1994, *Tower Block*, which inventoried at a very basic level over 400,000 units of multi-storey public housing. But how feasible would this be today, following decades of ‘regeneration’? In some places this would require archaeological excavation rather than architectural recording. And which are the most effective agencies for recording these vast yet often fragmented environments: top-down, government survey programmes or bottom-up community recording initiatives – or a combination of both? Yesterday’s study visits to RCAHMS and the Wester Hailes initiative explored precisely that issue. Hopefully, we will get some impression in the case studies today of any inventory efforts in the individual countries, and hopefully too, in this afternoon’s discussion we will explore these questions of inventorisation a bit further – including possible further action and initiatives.

The second issue we are focusing on at this conference is one of cultural geography, the cultural geography of mass housing within Europe. The previous DOCOMOMO initiatives concentrated

mainly on Western Europe, but with so much first-rate research now in place on the former socialist bloc, Carmen Popescu and I both felt that it would be timely to take our cue from that, and focus on both socialist-bloc housing and on East-West cross-comparisons.

I think that quite a few of our case study contributions today may highlight the great differences between mass housing in east and west, and certainly there is a lot of validity in that – one only needs to take a look at, for example, the contrast between the intricately crafted and individualised housing designs in Denmark, built by a myriad of housing companies and cooperatives, and the vast and open socialist state-built Plattenbau complexes on the other side of the Baltic.

But what I would instead like to draw attention to, in the remainder of this paper, is the fact that the mass housing of north-western, central and eastern Europe arguably had a number of significant aspects in common. For example, their timing and general political scope, with a rapidly accelerating postwar housing drive enjoying rather wide public support as part of a general socialist or welfare-state modernisation ethos, reaching a climax in the late 60s and 70s, then petering out, in the mid 70s in Western Europe and a decade later in Eastern Europe – all this in contrast, for example, to the much more restricted character and abrupt collapse of public housing in the US. Or the patterns of tenure, with social renting from public or collective agencies overwhelmingly the norm, as opposed to the much more prominent role of semi-private apartment

blocks in the Americas, places like Toronto or Brasilia, or the Mediterranean. Or in location, with most developments in a generally quite spacious peripheral or suburban setting and only a minority involving urban demolition and redevelopment. Or in building patterns, where there were fairly consistent attempts to implement on a large scale the modernist formulae of maximal-sunlight spacing, orientation, greenery, and varied block heights up to around 20-25 storeys maximum, often much lower, more prefabricated and standardised in the east or ‘traditionally’ in situ constructed in the west.

All these are, of course, massively sweeping generalisations, with huge exceptions everywhere – but arguably, the decision to hold this conference in Scotland gives us an on-the-ground illustration of the concept of a northern and Central European mass housing ‘identity’, owing to the fact that our experience of mass housing in this country was something of a hybrid of both ‘sides’. Because of the peculiar strength of organised, municipally organised socialism in post 1945 Scottish cities and towns (although Edinburgh, where we are now, was a big exception to this) public housing became extraordinarily dominant in those places, especially in Glasgow – which is why it is very important that we are also going there on our field-trip tomorrow. Up to 80 or 90% of all new dwellings in postwar Scottish cities were in public municipal (or ‘council’) housing schemes (a far higher percentage than in the rest of the UK and astronomically high compared to, say, 2 or 3% in Denmark or W Germany). Across the country, rather vast and spacious developments

proliferated, not unlike the USSR in their relatively sparse landscaping, although not usually using large panel prefabrication. Many were built by municipal ‘direct labour’ rather than private contractors.

But the subsequent management of that built legacy has radically altered that picture. In many places that picture is now unrecognisable; in the reaction against that legacy, there have been rather more demolitions or radical Postmodernist rebuildings than in most ex-socialist countries. In Glasgow, the entire public housing stock was transferred to a housing association, the Glasgow Housing Association, which embarked on very radical reshaping schemes. To appreciate Glasgow’s East-West hybridity today, you have to be an archaeologist! And in Edinburgh most towers have gone already – it’s difficult to realise that 20 years ago there were 95 multi-storey blocks of public housing in Edinburgh. The one big exception to this general Scottish picture – an exception we have no time to investigate in detail in this conference - is the city of Aberdeen, now a veritable museum of social housing, owing to its municipal culture of careful husbandry of assets and regional pride. In the cases of Aberdeen and Glasgow, we witness radically different heritage management outcomes ‘on the ground’ stemming from rather similar cultural geographical origins within one small country.

Before we begin our main sequence of European case studies, I want to spend a short while highlighting this commonality in a more oblique way, by briefly expanding the focus of comparative

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discussion geographically to touch on a project on which I have recently embarked - provisionally titled ‘The Hundred Years War’ - to research a global history of C20 and early C21 modern mass housing. And in particular I want to look at two hotspots of public housing production, Hong Kong and Singapore, both of which are linked historically to Europe, but which have diverged from Europe, East and West, in almost all possible ways – not least because their housing drives are still vigorously in progress today – something whose implications take us straight back to the area of heritage management.

Here in Europe, mass housing is something entirely of the past, a troubled legacy about which we can stand back and ask – is this or is this not heritage? But there, things are more complicated. These two Asian city states have both developed long-term mass housing strategies since the 1950s – in the Singapore case since 1927, when the Singapore Improvement Trust was set up - as a response to fearful demographic and political pressures – but in very different ways. But today, both are still building on a significant scale - around 15,000 units a year, although that is sharply down from earlier annual maxima of as much as 85,000 for Hong Kong ten years ago – pro rata, over twice the highest output of Scottish public housing in the late 60s.

More striking still is that these programmes are run within highly free market-capitalist societies by massive, centralised Government housing agencies covering the whole territories – the Hong Kong Housing Authority and the Singapore

Housing and Development Board - and as part of fearsomely comprehensive land-use planning strategies involving effective state control, or nationalisation, of most or all land and embedding of once-transitory populations through building of mass housing – in the Singapore case, as part of an authoritarian government ethos of mass national mobilisation, and in Hong Kong, in a programme that has carried on unbroken either side of the 1997 return to China. Tenurially, both programmes show a sharp difference from Europe, having placed tremendous emphasis on government building of flats for sale, on strictly controlled terms, to curb property speculation. These ‘Home Ownership’ schemes now cover 90% of the population in Singapore, but, for the moment, are in abeyance in Hong Kong.

But the biggest distinctiveness is, of course, in the built form. The land shortage, combined with other factors such as the subtropical or tropical climate, has led to solutions that are sharply different both from Europe and from each other. In both cases, the British modernist formula of planned new towns combined with radical sanitary redevelopment was adopted in a much higher-density form, discarding the obsession with space and sunlight in favour of the very opposite. In Hong Kong, the mountainous terrain and huge refugee influxes shaped a tradition of very high land prices, slum overcrowding, and very small new flats: the strong private housing sector further restricted public housing land supply. In Singapore, all these factors were less severe.

So at every stage of the public housing story,

Hong Kong’s built solutions were denser and higher than Singapore, beginning in the mid 50s with the astronomically dense 7th Mk 1 Resettlement blocks, each rehousing several thousand squatters in unserviced single rooms, when the Singapore Improvement Trust was still building 3-room flats in three-storey blocks. The contrast was just as sharp in the mature public housing programme of the 80s and 90s, when Singapore’s HDB architects perfected an even-height, carpet-like New Town formula of medium-height blocks arranged in individually-planned, dense ‘precincts’ and offset by punctuating towers – increasingly in rather flamboyant Postmodern styles – while Hong Kong went for a tower-based formula of standard 41-storey straight Modernist point blocks with rather British-sounding standard type-names – Harmony, Concord, Trident – and containing much smaller flats than Singapore. More recently, Singapore has complicated this dichotomy in inner urban-renewal schemes and redevelopments of older estates, by also going for blocks of around 40-50 storeys, but in more isolated outcrops rather than the serried arrays of soaring hilltop towers that make Hong Kong unique in the world of public housing.

Heritage-wise, the position is also radically different from Europe. On the one hand, the overtones of stigma, failure and under-demand that complicate our housing heritage debates in Europe are absent. Even after Hong Kong’s ‘Ronan Point moment’ – the demolition of two brand-new 41-storey Concord blocks in 2001 after corrupt piling contractors had left them both slightly curved like giant bananas – the programme

still retained its public support. On the other hand, the land scarcity imposes an ethos of constant renewal: although the programmes themselves are institutionally as old as many in Europe, the earlier phases of emergency housing like Hong Kong’s 1950s Resettlement blocks have all vanished – the very last Resettlement blocks at Lower Ngau Tau Kok were demolished last year, to be replaced by new public rental housing in ‘site specific’ blocks up to 47 storeys high.

Although some isolated blocks have been preserved, including one Mk1 block in Hong Kong and some 1930s-1950s SIT estates in Singapore, heritage in both places is more a matter of local community recording (as here in Wester Hailes), and also even of celebration, with the passing of much-loved estate being marked by nostalgic exhibitions and events. Public housing is seen as a collective asset to be husbanded and cherished until it can be replaced by even better public housing, at an increased density that, for example, allows all new estates to have as a matter of course an integrated commercial and community centre bigger than Cumbernauld New Town’s centre.

That is maybe the most sobering thing about this from the viewpoint of us Europeans, East or West – that what unites us is an assumption that mass housing is something of the past, whose governing dynamic is a matter of managed but irreversible decline, whether in eastern Umbau Ost or in equivalent western situations – whereas the dynamic in Hong Kong and Singapore is one of managed growth and renewal. It would be crass in

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this context to simply talk of ‘western decline’ and ‘the rise of Asia’ – especially as most other Asian countries have very different policies, although large-scale public housing is now spreading to S Korea and Mainland China. But can we learn something from this more positive approach? Or do we simply write off European public housing as a lost cause, an imperfect heritage whose original ideals are only now for the first time being properly realised somewhere else?

Hopefully, this conference will allow some of these questions to be aired.