

THE NEW TENEMENT: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Friday, 10 May 2013, Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art, 167 Renfrew Street, Glasgow

'The Making of a Socially Sustainable Town'

by Christoph Kohl (KK architects, Berlin)

To be honest, before I was invited to this conference, I was not really familiar with the English term tenements.

Quite surprising – because to my understanding – during my twenty years of practice I was mainly busy proposing and designing this type of housing.

On Wikipedia I learn: „A tenement is, in most English-speaking areas, a substandard multi-family-dwelling in the urban core, usually old and occupied by the poor”.

This typology for sure is not the architect's favorite object to design, but we also realize that large parts of today's cities are built up by this specific form of housing.

In Germany they use the term 'Mietskasernen', which translates as a 'Barrack of Rental Units'. Quite a negative specification I would say. And it also explains why as a design task it doesn't present itself as the sexiest job for an architect today.

At least I don't see them in 'pretty pictures' printed on the covers of magazines or published on the internet.

The typology of the 'Mietskasernen', or tenement, was not an aspect of the architect's education at the time when I was studying – which at that time was very design driven, particularly in Italy.

The historical towns were not accepted as an urban model, and the challenge of mass housing was mainly addressed by creating high-rise low-dense settlements on the periphery of the city.

However, Berlin – the city which I live and work in since before the 'Fall of the Wall' – has always been known as the 'world's largest tenement city', a description as condemning as the book on this 'City of Stone'.

If you look at what large swathes of the urban fabric is made up of what we may identify as tenements, then you understand how important this typology is –

to create the critical mass of urbanity,

to form the pattern of the cities and,

to condition the way of social cohabitation.

These 'success factors', I've just summed up, came to light when the IBA – the International Building Exhibition – was organized in Berlin in the early 1980s; West-Berlin to be precise, NOT the official West-Berlin but rebellious, alternative West-Berlin.

The ensuing built results from the idols of that era - Alvaro Siza, Aldo Rossi, Mario Botta, Oswald Matthias Ungers and many others - last but not least Rob Krier (my father in law, which I had the luck to get to know) made it so clear to me – as a student in the middle of my studies (in Innsbruck, Vienna and Venice), how cities should be given form: Cities with a Past and a Future.

I also suspected how healthful this methodology, to place building by building/house by house, would be for existing and new cities, and how much work this practice could generate for me and my fellow students. [The second aspect is a story of its own because the hunt after 'Le Grand Project' still is a fact.]

My first prominent project (together with Rob Krier, obviously) was the KIRCHSTEIGFELD. A 'Grand Project' indeed, to which I dedicated 5 years of my career.

But, due to our stance on the matter, the design task for the program - of 2,800 residential units and 110,000 sqm of non-residential space on 60 hectares of land - was divided between 25 architects groups.

(Not that there wouldn't have been offices with the capacity to handle such an order solely, but) WE are convinced that a livable town can only be created if the number of architects is proportionally balanced with the number of future occupants, while still successfully meeting the needs of standards and regulations on parking spaces, commercial infrastructure, educational infrastructure, playgrounds, and the even non-prescribed needs such as landscape and – believe it or not – social infrastructure in form of a church.

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All these components of a town – even of a city – need their place, their right position. I have allocated them in a way that the most 'natural' situation was composed, a self-revealing-map was established.

Actually, one may call KIRCHSTEIGFELD a town made of tenements both in architectural typology and in socio-economic structure so to speak. The main component is the multi-storey-building, of predominantly subsidized apartments. 2,400 of the planned 2,800 units are subsidized social housing units. Only 400 apartments were dedicated to the free market.

My point in this is that the history of architecture teaches us that the specific building category of the Mietskaserne was originally created to house workers and that the intensity with which they were built and occupied was what provoked the social housing program. As an example the Hufeisensiedlung by Taut and Wagner, one of the first social housing estates, was to represent a new architecture for a new society - as a counter-model for private-sector speculative building and its tenements.

The very first Social Housing Building as a reaction to the discredited Mietskaserne in Berlin was in 1842 the building on Torstrasse 86. Actually the building is still existing.

These programs, at least in both Germanys, reached such an advanced level that fully equipped urban quarters were designed and developed for the workers sake.

As comparison, current examples of KK's design I'm showing you the projects FLORA GÄRTEN in Berlin-Pankow and FLOTTWELL LIVING in Berlin-Mitte, SPEICHERSTADT in Potsdam which are in essence the same architectural typology we believe in, but for the private market, which, in a Germany that hasn't had a social housing program for the last twenty years, these units are for the 'workers' anyway.

The nature of the workers class changed to the same extent that the nature of their habitation changed, which made it possible to be upgraded from the simplest single-room-accommodation with multi-occupancy in

the beginning of the 19th century to New Towns - as the urban projects by KK claims to be - at the end of the last century.

Only if one is 'thrown back' in time a bit, like the way I experience it these days masterplanning in provincial Russian for the agglomeration of BEREZNIKI-SOLIKAMSK-USOLYE at the foot of the Ural mountains in the region of Perm, one can grasp what an achievement the highly developed social housing program, is.

Yet it was the initial 'simple' urban form of the tenement which was the true inspiration for the housing that forms these new towns. And it is revealing to perceive what a span there is in between a simple warm and rainproof shelter and New Towns such as the CITADEL BROEKPOLDER, HAVERLEIJ or, much larger, BRANDEVOORT.

These 'locations' in the Netherlands are acknowledged with awards because of their ambition and innovations at all levels: urban layout, built quality, landscape, architectural style, sustainability, ecology, and – last but not least – for their extraordinary capacity of forming a neighborhood.

Once the Tenements were introduced to give to the workers class the minimum of a decent living and to simply group them was more the purpose I would say, than to conceive a desirable location, as today it is requested more and more, all the while 'concept', 'branding' and 'lifestyles' are marketing slogans for the postindustrial society.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times", starts Charles Dickens novel 'A Tale of Two Cities'. Although huge changes happened in the human society in the run of almost 150 years actually no changes occurred with respect to the sense of well-being 'feeling at home' and with respect to 'the public space'. This 'well-being' is demonstrated by the citizens of Brandevoort in their yearly Dickens Night event.

The buildings we live our private lives in ideally form the background of the space we move in as public beings. In

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the same vein, as we turn to face someone the facades should turn toward each other. In the same way we communicate with each other, the facades make gestures and express their designation.

Houses are not only well organized storages of conveniently and functionally designed flats but should stimulate the inhabitant's behavior and 'support' them in sharing space and time as citizens.

I would like to point out that with this philosophy I do not at all "reject the modern world and the aesthetics of commercialism in favor of a recreation of the world as it existed just before the industrial revolution" – if you allow me to refer to a quite recent article in The Guardian (Thu. 2 May 2013, by Owen Hatherley) in which HRH is criticized because of his impertinent naïvety – and that I too would recall a world "where the majority lived shorter, sicker, but much more picturesque lives."

No, I don't. But I learned and experienced that the ideas of tradition in my approach to form, scale and space, particularly in relation to housing, is of great influence on the human/social wellbeing, and the true making of a socially sustainable town.