

The history of social housing revisited

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Reviewed: Danièle Voldman (dir.). 2010. *Désirs de toits. Le logement entre désir et contrainte depuis la fin du XIX^e siècle* (lit. “Desire for a roof. Housing and the balance between desires and constraints since the late 19th century”), Paris: Créaphis Éditions.

Since the end of the 19th century, how have residents’ wishes been taken into account by the public authorities responsible for building social housing? Through a series of case studies on housing policies and those involved in their implementation, this work, led by the historian Danièle Voldman, challenges a number of accepted notions and invites the reader to take another look at the history of social housing.

At a time when the political elite is calling housing policy into question and the architectural community is involved in the design of new forms of housing, studies devoted to the history of social housing in general – and that of large social housing projects in particular – abound. In this context, *Désirs de toits*¹ proposes a re-examination of the “cornerstone of our society” that is housing in a new light, in order to challenge various aspects of received wisdom concerning the objectives pursued by successive French governments, from the 1912 law that created *offices publics d’habitations à bon marché* (public offices for low-cost housing) through to current urban planning policies. This collection – the result of a seminar organised jointly by the Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and the CNRS (French National Scientific Research Centre) – has been compiled under the direction of Danièle Voldman, an authority on reconstruction and urban history. It brings together eight contributions that examine the subject of housing from a variety of angles, mainly in the field of architectural history, but also in areas such as sociology and urban development.

Received wisdom regarding housing policy

This work, despite what the title might lead one to believe, is positioned from the standpoint not so much of residents themselves as of the responses provided by public authorities to the “desire for a roof” – the fundamental social aspiration that forms the basis of actions undertaken both by decision-makers and by those whose job it is to design or market housing. The great virtue of this work is that it challenges the idea of a consensual, state-driven process embodied by a few key pieces of public policy legislation. In fact, there are many examples of dissent that repeatedly divided opinion among reformers, HBM (low-cost housing) companies and parliamentarians alike. The lines of contention included whether the priority should be to encourage access to home ownership or to provide rental housing at moderate rates; whether the key target group should be better-off workers or those who are more vulnerable; whether it is better to build individual houses

1 Translator’s note: the original French title is a pun on the expression “*désir de toi*” – “desire for you”.

or collective apartment buildings; whether projects should be located in inner-city areas or out in the suburbs; and, finally, the extent to which such operations should be supported by public finances.

The article by Claire Carriou, a specialist in urban planning and development, shows the impact that such disagreements had on the practices of local contracting authorities in the context of the implementation of national laws by local HBM companies (in this particular instance, in Nantes in western France and in Neuilly-sur-Marne near Paris). If we look beyond the number and form of projects realised, the construction of social housing appears to be very much a matter of local governance. The difficulties encountered by the powerful HLM Office of the Seine *département*² – which, from its creation in 1915, was responsible for housing the working classes while at the same time restricting the disorderly growth of the suburbs – is charted in a similar way. Confronted with the even more powerful City of Paris HLM Office, and destabilised by successive administrative reorganisations in the Paris region, officials at the Seine HLM Office experienced even greater difficulty agreeing on the sanitary criteria of the housing units to be built, on the definition of essential comforts to be included, and on the ratios for the allocation of housing among French applicants and applicants from those countries that supplied the greatest numbers of foreign workers (namely Italy, Belgium and Poland before World War II, and Spain, Portugal, Algeria and Sub-Saharan Africa after the war). Up until its definitive transformation in the 1980s, the 50,000 or so housing units for which it was responsible were used to help eradicate shanty towns in the Paris region and to house families of migrant workers from the 1970s onwards, in the context of a continual impoverishment of its housing stock.

One of the accepted notions most fervently challenged is the idea that, from the 1950s, the French government promoted only high-rise housing. In reality, a great many houses were built in the 1960s, in response to a clear public preference – confirmed by opinion polls – for individual houses. Despite bad memories of the uncontrolled sprawl of individual homes that mushroomed in the interwar period, the government continued to encourage experimentation involving different types of good-quality, innovative individual housing, by organising numerous competitions and exhibitions, involving a subsidiary of the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (a French public financial institution) and the bodies in charge of coordinating 1% housing-fund contributions (a system whereby French companies above a certain size contribute directly to the cost of building social housing), and pressing for the creation of building-society accounts. In total, during the *Trente Glorieuses* period (the 30 years between 1945 and 1975), the construction of individual housing represented a significant – if still poorly quantified – part of the national housing effort in France.

Housing and the challenge of social diversity

Particular mention should be made of the article by the architect and architectural historian Paul Landauer, who brings into perspective the long-term developments in the debate on social diversity, from the birth of the labour movement (marked by the concerns of the “bourgeoisie” with regard to the working classes) to the French law of 2003 that set up the ANRU (French National Agency for Urban Renewal), in response to both the impoverishment of social housing neighbourhoods and the urban riots of the 1990s. For two centuries, the thorny question of whether social classes should be isolated or integrated has been on the table. The tension surrounding this issue has produced all sorts of solutions, some involving the concentration of the popular classes, while others recommended their dispersal. This began in the 19th century with the first Cité Napoléon, built in Paris in 1850 and a sharp contrast from the Haussmann-style apartment blocks where social status was linked to the floor one inhabited. But how could sanitary working-class housing be built in a

² Translator’s note: HBM (*habitations à bon marché* – low-cost housing) offices were renamed HLM (*habitations à loyer modéré* – moderate-rent housing) offices in 1949. The Seine HBM/HLM Office covered the inner suburbs surrounding the city of Paris.

market that, in the major cities, was subject to intense pressure in terms of available land? Ultimately, the HBM estates that form the “Red Belt” around Paris – just like the tower blocks of the HLM estates constructed later on – were built on land that was consequently taken off the property market. However, more recently, the ambitious urban renewal programme launched at the start of the 21st century represented a major turning point, by breaking with the dogma of public ownership of land, in opposition to the national social housing construction programme (1954–1975) and the three decades of urban policy that followed it (1974–2004). Indeed, this latest programme encourages the sale of plots of land, with the aim of diversifying the population of social housing estates and attenuating segregation effects; apartment blocks are demolished to make way for real-estate operations that emphasise their residential nature, in particular through the use of gates and restricted access.

Furthermore, against the backdrop of a historiography that has often presented social housing as the result of normative public action, the article by art historian H  l  ne Frouard seeks to uncover evidence of the dreams and aspirations of the popular classes in the 1920s and reconstruct situations where certain members of these social classes were in a position to express their own desires and ideas concerning their housing. In this regard, the creation of workers’ cooperatives, together with the availability of financial products for individuals wishing to build “for their own personal use”, gave rise to projects that, to date, have been practically unexplored but which reveal housing ideals that differed just as much from company-built workers’ houses as they did from the archetype of middle-class suburban villas.

Alternative forms of housing and modern comforts

In the final part of the book, three contributions approach the issue of housing from a more unusual angle. The article by sociologist Claire L  vy-Vroelant studies forms of housing that do not fit into the typical “sedentary” model. The author moves beyond nomadic houses produced by avant-garde designers to examine those people that are not taken into consideration by the nomenclature of the national statistics office, which only records details of households comprising a group of occupants of a private housing unit used as a primary residence. This excludes residents of hostels, boarding houses and prisons, as well as those who live in caravans, mobile homes or emergency housing. Far from fostering the mobility that these lifestyles increasingly call for, these temporary lodgings tend to become marginalised dwellings in the long term.

The article by Nick Bullock, a reader in architectural and planning history at Cambridge University, charts the spread of the dream of a modern kitchen in the 1950s, thanks to the Salon des Arts M  nagers (the French equivalent of the Ideal Home Exhibition) and its prototype for a “resolutely modern and contemporary ideal apartment”, sponsored by weekly publications such as *Paris-Match*, *Marie-Claire* and later *France-Soir* and *Elle*. This model dwelling – the veritable centrepiece of the exhibition, attracting 1.5 million visitors at the time and nicknamed the “4CV” of housing – sought to be just as modern and accessible as the Renault car of the same name. For the young executives of the period, the different models of apartment on offer represented an ideal of domestic modernity that originated in the United States but was adapted both to the scale of French housing units (with a recommended surface area of 74 square metres laid down in regulations) and to the values of the French people, before the benefits of economic growth in the 1960s enabled greater proportions of the population to acquire refrigerators and washing machines.

Lastly, the architectural historian Patrice Gourbin examines the unusual phenomenon of transforming prestigious historic homes into housing that fulfils modern standards of comfort while still meeting the expectations of visitors fascinated by these remnants of the Ancien R  gime.

This is an elegant book, characterised by a clear writing style, which evidently has been masterfully edited. It is enhanced by an attractive typeface, an efficient system of references to the 50-odd captioned illustrations, grouped for the most part in two colour sections. Despite its

eclecticism, this collection of well-informed short monographs, based on little-known archives and which shed new light on the question of how best to house the greatest number of people in the best possible conditions – a central issue for our society – is, in the final analysis, a valuable tool for understanding the issues at stake in the current debate on the link between urban form and social diversity.

Christine Mengin, the holder of a PhD in art history and a law degree, is a lecturer in the history of contemporary architecture at the Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, where she is currently the vice-president in charge of international affairs. She is also the co-author of a textbook on the history of modern architecture in France, published in 1997 by Éditions Picard, and has written *Guerre du toit et modernité architecturale : loger l'employé sous la république de Weimar* (“Roof wars and architectural modernity: housing employees under the Weimar Republic”), Publications de la Sorbonne, 2007), as well as various articles on the housing history, German architecture and judicial architecture in France and the United States. She is a founding member of the European Architectural History Network (www.eahn.org), of which she was president from 2005 to 2010. Her current research concentrates on the heritage preservation of the urban form; a publication she has co-directed with Alain Godonou on the heritage of Porto-Novo, Benin is due to be released in 2011.

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