

Strange days

2 July, 2015 By Owen Hatherley



Owen Hatherley considers the future of urban housing provision

The mid-1970s saw the end of an era in housing – that is, the end of the notion that housing was best provided by the state, usually in local form via municipal governments, and that it was best constructed at great speed – with industrial methods if need be – in order to pull as many people as possible out of 19th-century slums (in western/central Europe) or age-old rural poverty (in eastern/southern Europe).

By around 1975 the job was mostly done. The horrors of what had gone before had become distant in the mind, and the criticisms – many of which now sound rather hysterical – didn't have to take much account of logic, because most importantly of all, this housing was associated with a political moment that had passed: the 'post-war consensus'. Whether social socialist or Christian democratic, Gaullist or 'real socialist', this tended to have similar built results.

Different approaches were taken to its replacement – interesting outliers such as self-build in south London or 'critical reconstruction' in west Berlin were gradually supplanted by a new dominance of private and speculative housing, with an 'offsetting' of social housing. This was usually charitable rather than municipal, in a new, 30-40-year consensus. The results could be relatively controlled, as in Sweden or Germany, or extremely careless, as in Britain, Ireland and Poland. All, however, were part of the same basic family.

Similarly, by around 2008, this all seemed to be over; discredited by a massive property crash, a financial crisis and an aesthetic revulsion at the increasingly vainglorious, chaotic results. Apart from a handful of London boroughs who have attempted to build housing within the strict limits they've been set, by and large a clear alternative to the housing of the boom era has not emerged.

Neo-liberal housing in Europe has not been homogenous. Given that so much of its appeal was based on criticising social democratic housing as being repetitive and interchangeable, it simply had to be differentiated, especially as, unlike statesponsored housing, it had to be sold on an open market. The extent of this was so closely tied to each country's interpretation of the new consensus that it almost seemed to be illustrating an especially vulgar Marxist thesis.

London, Manchester, Dublin, Warsaw, Moscow et al, whether in exurban 'non-plan' or inner-city 'urban renaissance' mode, favoured a deregulated market and a deregulated architecture, without much in the way of architectural quality control, overall planning or infrastructure. The results from Dublin Docklands to Salford Quays to Stratford are messy, straggling, cheaply made, and usually – if not exclusively – in a bumptious architectural language of brightly coloured Trespa, 'barcode facades' and irregular silhouettes.

Cities such as Stockholm, Hamburg and Amsterdam no longer built public social housing en masse, but they did maintain planning, some sort of rent control and a sense of architectural order. It might have been basically the same thing – luxury housing on former industrial sites, usually on reclaimed, ex-working riversides, with dribs and drabs of selective social housing – but as architecture or urban morphology, they can feel strikingly different, ordered, elegant, comfortable, sometimes even arcadian.

As a result, the most impressive of 21st-century European housing schemes, such as Hammarby Sj.stad (1) and HafenCity, retained the ‘look’ of social democracy 53 the purpose of neo-liberalism. By contrast, equivalents at Cardiff Bay or Stratford High Street were a nailsdown- blackboard scree of aesthetic individualism and planning ineptitude. That contrast must have struck visitors from the more outright neo-liberal countries. How could a visitor from London not fail to be embarrassed when given the guided tour around the strikingly pretty landscaping, visual coherence, social facilities and transport infrastructure in Hammarby? How could the traveller from Liverpool not guiltily recall what had been done on either side of the Pier Head when looking at what Hamburg had done with the disused dockland in front of its rather Liverpoolian towering brick warehouses?

Accordingly, something is happening to housing in the UK, or at least to the way it looks. It has shed its Trespa and terracotta covering like a garish 1990s dayglo jacket, and cast off its wavy roofs as last year’s kitsch. Design for London guidelines enforce a palette of stock brick across the city, with increasingly regular fenestration, flat roofs and planar, straightened-out plans and facades. Other cities are following suit. Obviously, this too is a matter of cladding, and this too is a matter of tiny flats that are let out to investors as part of the endlessly remunerative pyramid scheme that is the London property market. But the result is that London’s housing now looks ever more ‘social democratic’: calm, sensible and in keeping with the housing that dominates the real London – stockbrick terraces and modular, often brick-infill, housing estates. In fact, given that the former were privatised or gentrified in the 1980s and this is happening to the latter now, all of these typologies are rapidly melding into one.

Some hope has been placed in the promise of local councils setting up shell companies in order to build housing again. Among them is the London Borough of Southwark, promising more than 10,000 new council homes over the next three decades. Unlike similar projects – Birmingham’s recent, small-scale council housing programme, for instance, where simple designs by local architects were crushed by the by contractors’ shoddy implementation – the architecture promises to be of a high quality. The pilot project is a small estate by architect Panter Hudspith, another set of sober, neat, regular and brick-clad Modernist buildings, a highly unusual 80 per cent of which are let at a social rent. However, it is designed mostly to rehouse people ‘decanted’ from other estates in the borough, and even if it builds its seemingly ambitious full programme, Southwark will only barely replace the huge quantity of – perfectly decent, structurally sound – council homes it has demolished or sold to developers, meaning they’re essentially running to stand still, letting developers build in one site to extract the section 106 agreements needed to build council housing on another.

In the absence of any real structural change, the reaction to the collapse of an entire economy and ideology – the belief that the market knew best, that finance capital could do anything, that entrepreneurs were superhuman, that private was always better than public – has been entirely cosmetic.

Although critiques are usually of towers of glass with iconic shapes, when they’re actually built, expect the clusters of residential towers in controversial London areas such as Mount Pleasant or Nine Elms to have flat roofs and be clad in the politest stock-brick panels, as if they’re actually badly planned escapees from Amsterdam South or Borneo-Sporenburg. Accordingly, the moment we’re in is a strange one. Something has changed. People now talk about the bankruptcy of ‘iconic’ architectural masterpieces constructed by indentured labourers, of skylines of bumptious competing towers and the privatisation of the city.

But many of the things that protesters demand – to be in keeping, to use local materials, to respect the local heritage, to refurbish great historic buildings – are things that developers can do, if they can be bothered. In this, King’s Cross is the exemplar. What they can’t do is build a social city, solve a housing crisis, make cities less unequal. Other questions need to be asked of housing. Who owns it? Who is it for? Who benefits?

[This essay was first published in Exemplar Housing Estate Regeneration in Europe – a collaboration between the Architects’ Journal and Karakusevic Carson Architects](#)

Readers' comments (2)

- [Peter Dew](#) 2 July, 2015 2:45 pm

At last; someone getting to grips with a selection from the real issues, not only one of them alone to make a point. Now; how about star rating the housing itself, to see what we all think of it, and not only the new, but the existing as well ? Would anyone choose to stay in a 1 star hotel if they had a real choice, the starting point being to know where the others are ?

- [Andrew Matthews](#) 2 July, 2015 5:54 pm

Experience has taught us to be less pessimistic about the role of the private sector. There are some good examples - such as our own Abode at Great Kneighton for Countryside - of how the private sector has delivered genuine mixed social neighbourhoods to a high specification in partnership with a housing association. Society has changed utterly since the mid-1970s, and so too has the market, with some entrepreneurial private sector providers increasingly aware that it is in their interests to do the right thing. The degree of change is such that other sectors - particularly the state-funded sector - are having to catch up with private developers: and perhaps there is a reason why some are mimicking private sector delivery structures through new shell companies. Look outside of London too: Abode with 40% of all the dwellings being affordable, on the outskirts of Cambridge, shows how local authorities in other parts of the country are leading the way and have much to teach the capital.
