

The idea of the City in the Social Housing experience throughout the past century: scale, shape and extent

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Abstract

We can say that social housing was a big part of all the architectural experience of the last century, since it had the responsibility of partially or totally (according to some) solve a housing problem that, more than physical, was also social and political.

Architects and Urban planners work hardly in the search of solutions that would face the pre-existing problems of housing in the traditional city, as the result of an uncontrollable industrial growth, among others. Their solutions varied according to their intentions and their ideological purposes, and different proposals were made in order to solve the same problem: to dignify the urban living of the lower classes, the ones that most suffered from housing shortage and speculation.

Although different and specific, we can gather most of the experiences in three categories, the first two attempting to overcome the traditional city by a) creating a disperse organism according to a scale and spatial solutions dear to previous urban settlements, or b) inventing a condensed city as part of an infinite modern system. Finally, the last group includes c) the rehabilitation of the traditional city fabric by surgical or large interventions.

The idea of the paper is not to offer a critical review of the different ‘cities’, or even to make a choice, among them, of the perfect settlement, but just to present different solutions supported by various case-studies, pointing flaws and successes, demystifying misconceived ideas or supporting others. Here, more than answers will be offered tools of evaluation for present and future proposal of architects and urban planners.

Keywords: Social Housing, city, dwelling, housing.

Introduction

The present article is inserted in a more extended investigation that uses the ‘minimum cell’ as an alibi to study the evolution of the idea and the shape of social housing in Europe during the XX century. Several scales have been studied in previous articles presented in other conferences (and inserted in a Thesis: ‘The Minimum Cell’): the unit, the house, the building, the neighbourhood, and now, the city. In this study, therefore, it will be made an evaluation of the different urban structures according to the built and human surroundings and how they were adequate (or not) to people’s needs, and it’s relation with the ‘housing cell’, the basis of most architectural thinking of the evaluated period.



The Condensed City

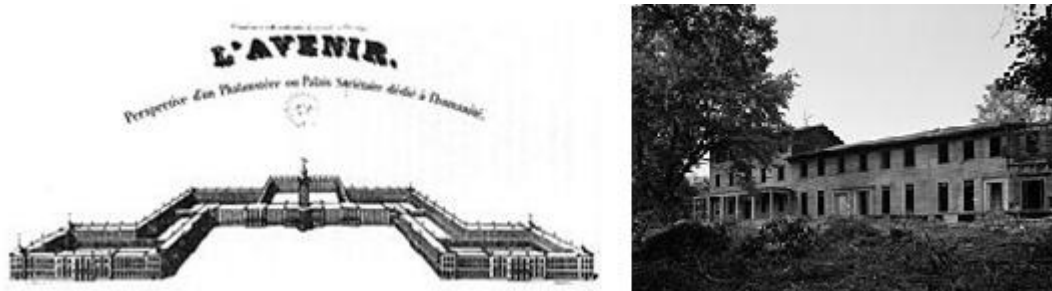
Some of the first humanitarian movements who tried to improve labourers' living conditions proposed models that were still based in the urban fabric, like Henry Roberts (1803-1876) and his 'Streatham Building' (1948). Other went further ahead rethinking the entire urban context, instead of 'solving it' locally.

Long before the Russian 'Dom-kommunas', the 'Phalanstère' was an idea of Charles Fourier (1772-1837) who dreamed with a new social order that would abolish the Industrial Revolution's prevailing materialism. Agriculture would be the main economical support of a four-storey building where all social and domestic life would take place.

There were three communal spaces, one destined to dining rooms, libraries and offices, other to work and other 'noisy' activities, and finally ballrooms and meeting rooms for people outside the Phalanstère. The private apartments were based in a new family structure where the privacy of each household member was praised.

Followers started to appear since 1820 and the first building of this kind was built in Conde-sur-Verge (1833-1836), supported by the local bourgeoisie. A lot of supporters were found in the United States where the abolitionist ideals were well sustained by Fourier's liberal ideas about women's liberation. It was not a successful enterprise, as the America Phalanstères lasted an average of 2 years.

Figure 1. The 'Phalanstère' in Fourier's writings and a model built in the United States



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phalanst%C3%A8re>, [01.2011]

The 'Famillistère' was conceived by a 'disciple' of Fourier, Jean-Baptiste Godin (1817-1888) who even financed the unsuccessful American experience of 'La Reunion' phalanstère. However he saw the new social order as a basis of industrial development, instead of Fourier's 'agricultural' ideas. His 'Famillistère' was therefore built near his stove factory, which had recently moved from the inner city to the Guise suburb (as it needed more room to expand his growing business).

The building's physical formula was maintained, with three volumes joined through its corners, with communal services like daycares, schools, laundries, etc. The ensemble was idealized to be a city within a city, since its autonomy didn't exclude its interaction with same kind buildings.

Figure 2. The 'Famillistère' in its context (near the factory) and views of the inner courtyard and from the outside.

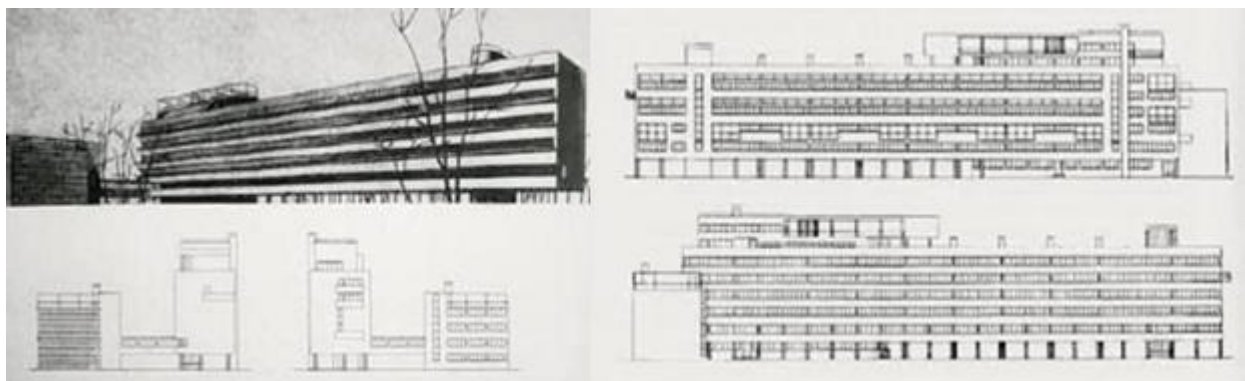


Sources: Google Earth, 49°53'59.02"N, 3°37'40.86"E, image taken in 01/01/2006;
<http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famillist%C3%A9rio>, [01.2011]

The extended Condensed City

The year of 1925 was considered as the apogee of the Russian Constructivism, a precise, mathematical and functional architectural response to society's problems. As a political statement, the 'individual' was diluted for a greater cause, the Community. Any similarity with previous architectural styles, connoted with the bourgeoisie, was avoided, the family structure included. Workers needed a new housing space where one's isolation was promoted: like in the previous 'Phalanstère' each had its own space, with communal services, and children were even raised in day-care facilities where they slept. The idea was to promote social contact, instead of personal one, and its most well-known built manifestation was the 'Dom-komuna' Narkomfin (1928), an example of the 'Social Condenser', who received obvious popular resistance to the living model.

Figure 3. 'Dom-komuna' Narkomfin



Source: <http://www.dearchitecturablog.com/?p=618>, [01.2011]

The new urban model that supported this structure refused the traditional city for the same reasons that were being acknowledged throughout Europe (overcrowding, poor hygiene, expensive leases). As a building, it was a sum of independent cells, the only space for the manifestation of the 'individual'. These cells were disposed successively and accessed by a shared corridor, intended to be a 'inner' street, more comfortable than an outside one. To the main building would be adjoined smaller buildings destined to be the communal and social spaces.

As this ensemble would (supposedly) support urban life, the city would become a succession of Dom-komunas with exceptional elements like Worker's Clubs, who had services not included in the main buildings. As a quick and efficient way to house workers, the main efforts and means would be applied in the industry sector that jointly would create the 'General Condenser', the city.

Figure 4. Urban insertion of the Narkomfin, who remained a single example in its context



Source: Google Earth, 51°33'6.64"N, 0° 9'43.74"W, image taken in 01/01/2006, [01.2011]

The Dom-komuna failed at many levels, since the living unit to the city model, as the family and vicinity relations remained the basis of the soviet society. The Narkomfin, despite being conceived as a transition model (with apartments for families, for instance) remains the example of the model's failure: nowadays a decrepit structure inserted in the surroundings of pre-revolutionary neoclassical buildings.

The London Isokon Flats (1934)¹ tried to apply the model in England, but its 'customers' were far away from the working class, like Agatha Christie, Marcel Breuer, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy e Walter Gropius, a more 'open-minded' clientele that accepted easily the minimum cell, its modern furnishing or even the communal services.

The Condensed City as a Unit

Post-war urban models are personified by Le Corbusier (1887-1965), according to the ideas he presented in the CIAM reunions ('Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne'). From its 4th reunion was born the Athen's Chart where it is written that the new urban solutions needed to be constructed from zero, and not over the old structure that was the traditional city. Hygiene, health, clean air and green spaces were incompatible with its 'horizontal' density, as the 'promiscuity' of its functions: housing, work and leisure.

The new city would be born in a blank sheet where each function had its separated place. Blocks became one single building with numerous floors (to spare ground space) accessed by inner galleries that gave access to apartment doors and some commerce and leisure spaces: these galleries intended to be streets, a place where people would get together and enjoy urban life... As buildings were vertical units, there was enough space among them for green and healthy spaces. There are obvious similarities with the Russian Constructivism, as Le Corbusier and Moisei Ginzburg (Narkomfin's author - 1892-1946) corresponded regularly.

The physical manifestation of Le Corbusier's theories is well-known: mainly the 'Unité d'Habitation de Marseille', but there were others in Nantes, Berlin or Briey-la-Forêt. Both formally and ideologically there are differences between both proposals, as Le Corbusier tends to be apolitical and, despite all, more cautious: there were shared facilities like the day-cares, gymnasium and such, but families were not 'deconstructed', although idealized as a 'nuclear' one: parents with two children.

¹ Authors: Isokon Studio, Wells Coates (1895 – 1958) and Jack Pritchard (1899 – 1992)

Figure 5. The 'Unité d'Habitation de Marseille': its urban context and façade



Sources: Google Earth, 47°11'18.55"N, 1°34'6.19"W, data da imagem: 15/03/2007
<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/33239870>, [01.2011]

Le Corbusier's 'whole' city was never built and its concept 'suffered' from the necessary adaptations to the surrounding's reality: after Marseille the units became smaller, Nantes and Berlin lack the communal services (whose maintenance was very expensive for dwellers) and in Briey shops are in the ground-floor, a more effective, and traditional, solution.

Various factors lead to the concept's deviation: these super-blocks had to be distant from the pre-existing city, but were unable to create its own centric magnet, as housing supporting services were the first to be sacrificed as money ran scarce. Therefore, rather than being independent from the traditional cities, these units and their heirs became totally subordinate to them. Housing speculation caused the increase of building density, depriving buildings from sun or green spaces, resulting all in an urban suburb far from the intended self-supporting city.

Failure and Redemption

The Pruitt-Igoe complex is an example that deserves some attention, given the consequences, both to the buildings and to Modernism. Minoru Yamasaki (1912-1986) designed in the 1950's 33 housing blocks with 11 storeys according to Modernist ideals, although the initial plan intended to have also medium and low rising buildings. The involved costs condemned this proposal, and the final project had more density than the Saint Louis slums. The high rising building dwellings were accessed by galleries, who became a place for robbers, since the most of its population were black, poor and unemployed (as segregation still took place).

Nevertheless 60% of the buildings remained unassigned and were illegally occupied. For all these reasons the whole complex was demolished, starting in March 16th, 1972, the day Modernism died, according to Charles Jencks². The project is generally considered a pure architectural failure, but we must take into account that numerous alterations were made to the original plan. Even the surrounding public spaces were never made, as for leisure and working infrastructures, the whole complex becoming isolated. As the Missouri State ended with Social Housing in 1956, the complex went for rental, but, considering the circumstances, it was considered as the last resort for home-seekers (which explains the partial occupation of the buildings).

² Jencks, Charles (1984). 'The Language of Post-Modern Architecture', pag. 9 New York: Rizzoli. ISBN 0847805719, ISBN 9780847805716, (quoted in: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pruitt-Igoe#cite_ref-5, [01.2011])

Figure 6. The Pruitt-Igoe complex in 1955, shortly after being built



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pruitt%E2%80%93Igoe#cite_ref-5, [01.2011]

However its dwellers considered the units 'well designed'³, but as an urban proposal it failed. But we must take into account that this is not an example upon we can make a correct evaluation of Modern urban planning, since its original plan was, as said above, hugely perverted, in its shape and in its social scheme. Even if Modern detractors argue that the Carr Village complex nearby, a low density estate, never had the same problems despite being occupied by the same social stratus.

Figure 7. The second building's demolition of Pruitt-Igoe broadcasted live in April 1972



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pruitt%E2%80%93Igoe#cite_ref-5, [01.2011]

Review, Continuity and Immutability

Even before the death of the Modern Movement was decreed there was already a group of architects who believe that it needed to revise its dogmas. The 10th CIAM was prepared by some of those architects who joined forces to create the TEAM X. Led by Allison and Peter Smithson⁴, they considered Modernism decontextualized, Functionalism excessively mechanized and the International Style a loss of identity. The 'genius loci' ('the spirit of the place') was therefore considered as the project's starting point, as opposed to previous theories that created the urban context upon the single living cell.

Le Corbusier's 'Unités d'Habitation' were criticized as the perfect example of the previous excesses. The traditional urban life was defended, as the 'Unités' couldn't support it: the shopping floor was a failure, the inner corridors were more like tunnels than streets and even the ground floor lacked the characteristics to support urban life. The counter-proposals tried to rethink these matters and fabulous utopias (like those of the Metabolists) were imagined in order to establish architectural discussion.

³ Sherwood, Roger – 'Modern Housing Prototypes', 7^a Edição, 2001, page 18, Harvard University Press, Cambridge e Londres, Inglaterra, ISBN: 0-674-57942-9

⁴ (1929-1993; 1923-2003)

The 'Park Hill Estate', by Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith, was built in 1957-1961, despite being designed in 1945. The general concept was influenced by Le Corbusier, but also by the Smithson couple who designed a proposal for a competition in Golden Lane, London (won by Geoffrey Chamberlin, Peter 'Joe' Powell and Christoph Bon⁵). They proposed 'streets in the sky', external galleries or corridors of great length and width destined to simulate a street. These corridors, despite being located in very high storeys, managed to allow the entrance of milk distributing cars through the different floors.

Figure 8. 'Park Hill Estate'



Sources: Google Earth, 53°22'47.57"N, 1°27'29.48"W, image taken in 10/04/2010.; http://www.e-architect.co.uk/leeds/sheffield_building.htm, [01.2011]

The organicism of the urban structure and streets was intended to be simulated by the building's sinuosity and the facades' dynamic treatment: 'betón brut' and orange, yellow and red brick were used to brighten up the continuity of the 'streets' (but time and smog turned its colours into a single shade of grey...). Initially a success, the resident's economical situation and the robberies and violence that took place in the 'streets in the sky' (like in 'Pruitt-Igoe') made its living very hard. Finally the whole building was nicknamed 'Saint Quentin'⁶, a famous American jail.

Figure 9. 'Park Hill's' galleries by night, vandalized; facade



Sources: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fictionalfuture/3938273865/in/faves-ellyoracle/>; <http://www.parkhillflats.co.uk/redev.html>; <http://www.flickr.com/photos/paolomargari/451545773/>, [02.2011]

Despite it all, it was recognized in 1988 as 'Architectural Heritage' and since then is being rehabilitated according to a project of 'Grant Associates' Studio⁷. The tallest blocks were entirely striped, leaving only the concrete structure, and new social housing but also offices and expensive apartments were built.

⁵ (1920 – 1999; 1919 – 1978; 1919 – 1978)

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,,547763,00.html>, [02.2011]

⁷ <http://www.grant-associates.uk.com/index.aspx>, [02.2011]

We may ask ourselves if this kind of intervention respects the author's initial intentions. The question is not merely formal, but also idealistic: as social housing, for the 'poor', the structure seemed to fail, but as high cost housing it is believed to be a success. Changing the type of residents is the way of making social architecture work, or just Modern high-rise architecture (despite the name they wish to call it)?

Figure 10. 'Park Hill' being renovated



Sources: <http://www.sublimephotography.co.uk/eastendphotos/isleofdogs/pages/robin.htm>, [01.2011]

At the same time the 'Pruitt-Igoe' was being demolished, the Smithsons 'inaugurate' the 'Robin Hood Gardens' building, that, as the previous example, stands for a model of English post-war Brutalism, whose investigation was based upon high-rise housing. The 'streets in the sky' were its main feature, since the sequence 'house/street/neighbourhood/city' substituted the mere functional differentiation made in the Athens's Chart: 'housing/work/leisure/circulation'.

The 'Robin Hood Gardens' were composed by two long buildings, with small obtuse angles in the middle. The outside gallery was, again, intended to be a street, as the housing units were organised in order for the gallery to have as many doors possible converging into it (a total of three floors had entrances to the same corridor). The doors were inserted in 'niches' in order to offer a small space between the 'street' and the 'house' where people could stop and talk.

Figure 11: 'Robin Hood Gardens'



Sources: <http://www.sublimephotography.co.uk/eastendphotos/isleofdogs/pages/robin.htm>, [01.2011]

But, as for the 'Park Hill' experiment, this was again a failure, since its ideological, physical and use characteristics were similar. The concrete facades (opposed to the pure white ones of the International Style) offered the buildings a decadent appearance, diluting at the same time any means of identification of 'their house', 'their street', 'their city' for the various dwellers.

Figure 12. 'Robin Hood Gardens' in its 'urban' context



Source: Google Earth, 51°30'34.13"N, 0° 0'32.76"W, image taken in 05/04/2006, [01.2011]

The architectural community in general believes that the theories supported by the TEAM X failed to be seen in its projects, as the Modernism main faults were not solved. Le Corbusier, however, admired and supported this kind of proposals, himself revising at the moment his own dogmas and proposing the same 'béton brut' in his projects, like in the 'Unités d'Habitation'. Painting each balcony with a set of primary colours did little for the dweller's loss of identity in the whole building, and eventually Briey-la Forêt suffered from abandonment since 1973 and it was even intended to demolish it in 1984. Finally, today it's considered as 'National Monument' by the French authorities, and Marseilles, after being restored in 2010 waits for the title on World Heritage attributed by UNESCO.

Park Hill was also threatened by a demolition process, before the present recovery process, but the 'Robin Hood Gardens' are still under the same menace. The British authorities denied the building's classification as of 'general interest', that would have prevented its demolition. There is a group of organized people that is trying to stop it⁸, but the authorities bunged, for example, any investment in the building's conservation to 'invite' dwellers to leave it for another building...

As for similar structures, the 'Hyde Park Flats', nearby the 'Park Hill Flats', were already partially demolished in 1991 in order to adapt them to the 'World Student Games' (to lodged the athletes). Still in the city of Sheffield, the Kelvin Flats, also a Brutalism piece of architecture from the 1960's were completely demolished.

⁸ <http://www.bdonline.co.uk/bd-launches-campaign-to-save-robin-hood-gardens/4000545.article>, [02.2011]

Figure 13. The 'Hide Park Flats', before its partial demolition (with the 'Park Hill Flats' behind them), and the already completely demolished 'Kelvin Flats', also in Sheffield



Source: <http://www.parkhillflats.co.uk/history.html>, [01.2011]

The legacy of all these building is sometimes unfair, since its projects suffered from alterations that compromised the whole complex: the 'Unités' were never inserted in a full Modern urban settlement that would made they more 'logical', and, as it was said, the 'Pruitt-Igoe' complex was far from being close from its original plan.

Today's suburbs tend to look closely to these 'perverted' settlements, as they are often composed by high-rise structures very densely build, without any kind of infrastructures whatsoever: leisure, commerce or even other kind of connection to the city they 'serve'. And, in complete opposition with the idealisms that originated the first structures, these complexes are completely incapable of consisting in urban settlements for themselves, remaining architectural and social ghettos.

Figure 14. Social Housing scheme in Gaia, Portugal



Source: <http://maps.google.pt/maps?ll=41.096199,-8.591555&spn=0,0.005681&z=18&lci=com.google.webcams&layer=c&cbll=41.096129,-8.591502&panoid=MUjfpNac6QyBtfX73qnMrw&cbp=12,62.48,,0,4.83>, [02.2011]

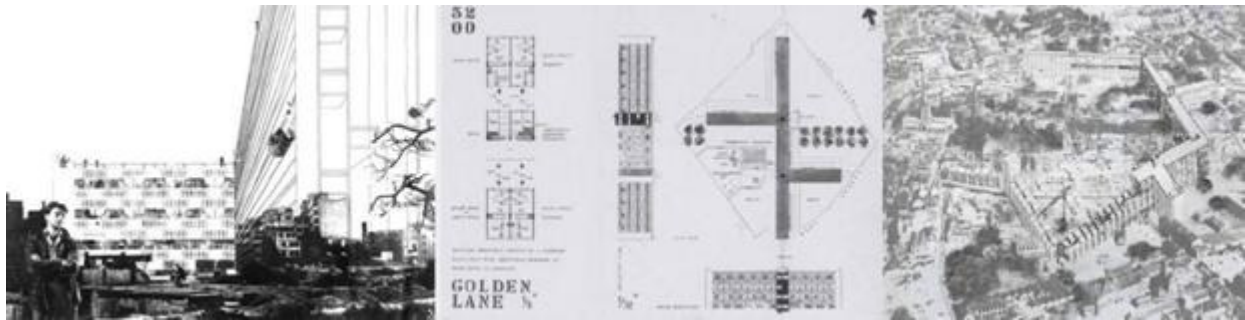
New 'patterns' in 'old fabrics'

As an urban proposal, Modernism shouldn't be considered as a simple or fast solution for all city's problems, although it tended to be that way for many years and for many architects, urban planners, and developers (with density and profit as a constant pressure).

As it was referred before, the Smithsons made an urban proposal for Golden Lane, a huge plot in the heart of London that was bombarded during the 2nd World War. As an open wound in the centre of the city, in the middle of a traditional urban fabric, a competition was created in order to round up proposal to solve the physical, urban and social gap created by the 'blitz'.

Having faith in their own ideas and believing that they were solving the above mentioned Modernist dogmas, the Smithsons rounded up their theories of mega-structures supporting urban life in their 'streets in the sky' to propose a complex that would make a great influence in the 'Park Hill Flats'.

Figure 15. The Smithsons proposal for the Golden Lane Estate

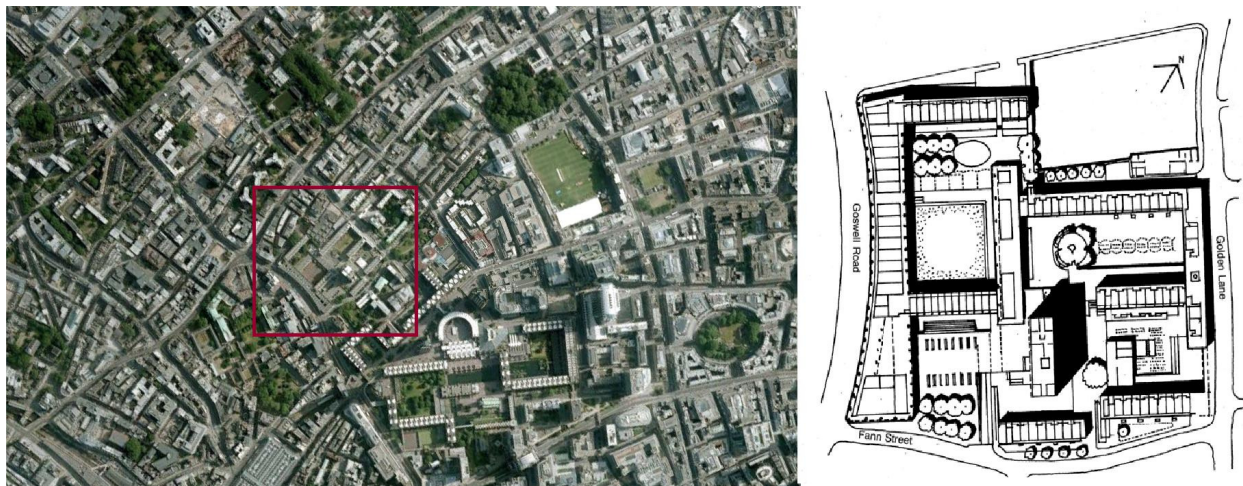


Sources: <http://maps.google.pt/maps?ll=41.096199,-8.591555&spn=0,0.005681&z=18&lci=com.google.webcams&layer=c&cbll=41.096129,-8.591502&panoid=MUjfpNac6QyBtfX73qnMrw&cbp=12,62.48,,0,4.83>, [02.2011]

The winning proposal was much different from the above. In fact, the Smithsons never even made to the runners-up, but still they publicized their proposal intensively in the press. Chamberlin, Powell and Bon⁹ won with a proposal that, despite opposite to the one of the Smithsons, it was very faithful to Modernist believes. It was composed by a series of blocks not higher than 6 storeys, except for the tower implanted in the centre of the plot, disposed orthogonally among them, that didn't have any intention of relating to the traditional city's way of occupying plots or quarters. Still, a sort of transition between old and new fabric is given by the curved building facing southwest, and, of course, the fact that the tower sits in the middle of the quarter 'protects' passersby from the otherwise dissonant element in the context.

⁹ 1920 – 1999 (Geoffry Chamberlin); 1919 – 1978 (Peter 'Joe' Powell); 1919 – 1978 (Christoph Bon)

Figure 16: 'Golden Lane Estate', by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon (1952): urban context and site plan



Sources: Google Earth, 51°31'18.75"N, 0° 5'41.25"W, image taken in 27/06/2010; http://housingprototypes.org/project?File_No=GB008, [05.2011]

The in-between space among the blocks had nothing to do with the typical private inner-blocks spaces, and it 'belongs' to all dwellers. Commerce, housing and pedestrian circulation are kept apart. Even the living cell was completely 'modern' and very similar with the 'Unités d'Habitation' apartment's layout: maisonettes with a double-height front balcony (and in the inner staircase, like in Nantes), accessed by an outside gallery, which are completely modernist elements, as they try to create the idea of a 'private house' among a large housing estate (a compromise rarely achieved).

Figure 17. 'Golden Lane Estate': facades and maisonette's floor plans



Sources: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/doctorcasino/2883343401/in/photostream/>, [05.2011]; author's drawing, based upon the model presented in: French, Hilary - *'Key Urban Housing of the Twentieth Century'*, 2008 Laurence King Publishing Ltd, ISBN-13: 978-1-85669-564-0

As a proof of the success of the whole housing complex, dwellers have an internet site¹⁰ where they invite everyone to publish their photo in order to recognize them as neighbours and discuss problems and solutions for the complex. A kind of pride also found in Ernst May's (1886-1970) Praunheim (1927) where the author is acknowledge by its dwellers and is drawings published in their site¹¹. And Praunheim has for its main reference the English Garden Cities...

The 'Brunswick Centre' (1959-1972) was another structure that was created to 'heal' the thorn fabric of the traditional city, destroyed during the war. The Camden district housed a project by Patrick Hodgkinson (1930 - ...) that, for years was 'one of the most miserable places in London - a rain-

¹⁰ <http://www.goldenlaneestate.org/>, [09.2010]

¹¹ <http://www.siedlerverein.de/>, [09.2010]

streaked, litter-strewn concrete bunker of empty shop units, whose ambitious, space-age design only accentuated its sense of failure'¹².

Figure 18. 'Brunswick Centre' before its recent intervention



Source: <http://www.vlugt.co.uk/hetero08.html>, fig. 14, 10 e 12, [02.2011]

The analysis of the project must take into account several problems that occurred during the 13 years that took to complete the whole structure. Initially it was intended to be a luxury estate (since it was located in Camden, a 'posh' neighbourhood), but after the promoter abandoned the project the city hall converted the scheme for social housing purposes. At that time, Hodgkinson had already abandoned the project, due to the pressure he felt from the promoters to alter its use, density and appearance.

If we observe Brunswick we recognize a well-known urban structure where housing is set in the above floors and commerce stands in the ground floor. Here the buildings open to the surrounding streets as they intend to establish continuity among them and the 'inner' street that was created inside the complex. The entrance to the dwellings is made in the facades facing the older streets in order to maintain its character with mixed uses, a truly urban dynamic.

Figure 19. Camden before the bombardments and the 'Brunswick Centre' and how it was intended to connect to its surroundings



Sources: <http://brunswickwc1.wordpress.com/2010/09/21/historic-maps-of-the-brunswick-site/>;
<http://www.vlugt.co.uk/hetero08.html>, fig. 13, [02.2011]

¹² **Rose, Steve** – 'Scrubs up beautifully', architecture critique in the October 23 of 2006 edition of the paper 'The Guardian'; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2006/oct/23/architecture.communities>, [02.2011]

The chosen aesthetics seem to deny all this purposes, with its access system (the outside gallery), the higher density of the blocks or their shape as football benches, and the use of 'betón brut' for the finishing of the complex. The architect, even if he affiliated himself to the heritage of Le Corbusier and others, worked with Alvar Aalto, that he refers as one of main influences. As such, searching for a more integrated character for its buildings, he idealized them in red brick (like the surrounding ones), abandoning the idea because of the involved costs. So he turned to a Georgian influence proposing a painting in 'Regency Stucco', an idea again refused for reasons of cost and real estate speculation. After becoming a 'social housing ghetto'¹³ (the architect intended to mix uses and social stratus), a new private company proposed Hodgkinson to rehabilitate the complex, which he accepted, with the help of David Levitt (...-...) and David Bernstein (...-...). If the project recovered its intended painting job, it was also revised in its public spaces, reducing, for instance, the width of the inner commercial street ('scaled' according to the surroundings) and building a block at the top of the same street, that before ended facing a blind wall.

Figure 20. The 'Brunswick Centre' after its renovation process in 2006



Source: <http://www.levittbernstein.co.uk/architecture/retail-offices/?image=1&page=1>, [02.2011]

Nowadays the 'Brunswick Centre' is a well-succeeded shopping area, as it stands close to the city centre and it's served by public transportation. And, of course, the 2006 renovation gave back its dignity but also changed its dwellers: David Levitt himself lives there and the 'ghetto' referred before has ended. And mainly because of a well made intervention in public space.

Conclusions and Questions

Despite the 'happy ending' there are a number of questions aroused that put into question the real success of this complex, and of all large housing estates. Despite 'Brunswick's' smaller scale, we must take into account that part of its failure was its exclusive use as social housing. And, of course, its success was due to the intervention of private investors that ended up changing its 'audience'.

As for 'Golden Lane Estate', its promoter was in fact the City Hall. But the housed city workers still tend to be financially above social dwellers, because as 'workers', they have a stable financial situation. And, at the end, the dwellers tended to be middle-classed and nowadays apartments in 'Golden Lane' are, at least, expensive... due to its success.

The 'Narkomfin' failure was due to its ambitious social intentions, but the British 'Isokon' building found its dwellers among well-read members, who knew how to adapt themselves to minimum areas and minimalist furniture...

¹³ Patrick Hodgkinson, quoted in the article: Rose, Steve – 'Scrubs up beautifully', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2006/oct/23/architecture.communities>, [02.2011]

Figure 21. 'Isokon Buildin', formerly known by 'Lawn Road Flats'



Source: <http://www.stace.co.uk/projects/detail.cfm?item=97>, [05.2011]

The solution founded for the 'Park Hill Flats' was its total reconversion, adding offices and luxury apartments to an originally exclusively social housing building. Still, mixing social stratus (like upscale dwellers with low income ones, as Hodgkinson also intended for 'Brunswick') it's a solution yet to be proven efficient and it adds more doubts about the possibility of large housing estates for social uses being valid solutions.

The architectonic solutions they represent tend to promote decreasing 'urban' living quality, as they have a propensity to be located in the outskirts of the main cities, which is a consequence that we can point also to the developers (private or public) that promote the complexes: the lack of investment denies these intended cities the necessary elements to make then urban (like commerce, leisure areas, etc.) and creates 'ghettos', dorms for poor people that tend to promote violence (as a last resort), made easier in large housing estates access systems, for instance.

Nevertheless, for the same reasons, we probably can't make a fully illustrated assessment of most of these proposals, since they never were completed as they were intended to be: the 'Unités' remained lonely buildings, and not part of the complex for which they were idealized (despite the shopping floors/streets in the middle of the building were a proven failure).

The anonymity promoted by these kinds of structures seems to be general nowadays, in any kind of housing buildings, where people hardly know any of their neighbours. And for some this is a valued characteristic, making the 'streets in the sky' useless. For others, it is a problem to be solved, like in 'Golden Lane' where neighbours want to get together... as they represent no 'danger' for the above reasons.

So, the questions remain: was Modern Architecture incapable of changing the world, or it never had the real chance to do so? Is it the scale or the dwellers that make huge structures ineffective? And if so, what lessons should we take from not so big complexes, built 'inside' the city, but that were successful according to their dwellers? Finally, are there any easy solutions?

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