

INTRODUCTION

This essay is the development of a lecture given at a symposium that addressed the issue of new typologies in housing. The essay posits the limitations of type as a starting point in housing design and questions whether the design for new housing can or should be arrived at through a concentration on new typologies. We argue that type should not be seen as an abstract initiator of housing design (driven by the will of the architect) but rather that a whole new range of economic and social conditions are driving the development of housing design - and that architects should be alert to these conditions.

THE LIMITS OF TYPE

British Architecture does not fully share continental Europe's predilection for type and typologies. This divergence starts with education and is particularly evident in the field of housing design. On the continent student design is often introduced through a typological analysis, whereas in Britain we see fit to invent from scratch, at best starting studio projects with a precedent study which ranges over a whole set of issues, of which type may be just a small element. On the continent many schools of architecture contain an Institute for housing or a unit specialising in housing design. In Britain these are almost unheard of. On the continent it is the expected norm that student portfolios contain housing design. In Britain it is the exception. The fault does not lie solely with the schools; it is more indicative of a wider problem. With the Thatcherite assault on public ownership in the eighties, the production of housing shifted radically from the public to the private sector, and with this shift the contribution of architects to the development of housing design largely withered. Housing was taken off the mainstream architectural agenda and replaced with the cut and paste of the private developers' catalogue plans.

A competition such as *Accommodating Change* that explicitly addresses issues of new housing typologies therefore comes as something of a shock to those atrophied design muscles. One reaction is to look for support in the realm of typologies. Whether these are the *ab initio* fumbblings of the British architect or the more mature

redeployments of our continental peers, there is a certain comfort in losing oneself in a haze of plans and patterns; it is in this absorption that the limits of type may first be identified. Typologies are a peculiarly architectural description of the world. They necessarily abstract, editing out so many of the difficulties, differences, temporalities and contingencies that the world throws up. Spaces full of vertical, visceral, cognisant beings are reduced to empty, horizontal patterns. The comfort for architects is that these patterns can be controlled and ordered – the world outside can be kept at bay. The power of typologies is that these abstractions can be classified and subjected to rules, creating an introverted architectural world unto itself. From Durand through the rationalists to the morphologies of space syntax, theorists have attempted to apply rigorous analytical processes to typologies, but as their presumed rigour increases so does the abstraction of reality. At this level, typologies of housing do not describe the conditions of housing at all, but represent a distorted belief system in which architects can conveniently get lost, untouched by the vicissitudes of the world beyond.

This abstracted escape defines the first limit of type as a paradigm of housing design. A second limit is the remarkably restricted set of models and presuppositions that housing types are based on. In Britain we are hard pressed to break away from the model of the Victorian family house with its rigid separation of rooms and activities – and in this separation the construction of conservative spatial patterns. It is a model which has proved surprisingly resilient to change, with the semi-detached garden city house remaining the aspirational paradigm, so that we often find new one-bed apartments treated as little more than a three bedroom house with the stair and two bedrooms removed. The pattern is further enforced by the Building Regulations which in a circular act are first based on, and then and regulate what they already know (the standard house) and thus cannot accommodate divergence from the norm. We are caught in the root and branch system of the standard model's genealogy when in fact we might find more appropriate prototypes for living in the twenty-first century if we were to move sideways, rhyzomically, and enter into other housing genealogies for inspiration – what would happen, for instance if our typological starting point were not the semi-detached house but a traditional Korean courtyard house?

The third limit of type is also a limit of architecture in relation to housing. Public housing sets a tension between the general and the particular. A generalised approach is needed because one does not have an individual user with specific lifestyles and obsessions. But at the same time a particularity is required because in the end the individual user must be able to appropriate the spaces for their own particular needs and in their own particular manner. This tension between the general and the particular is not encountered in most architecture, which tends towards one end of the spectrum or the other – for example towards the particular in the case of the one-off house or the general in the case of the office. It is a tension in which architecture's normative concerns with formal innovation and determinist solutions have little consequence, or indeed could be obstructive. Public housing questions so many of architecture's obsessions – those perfected, iconic, moments – and demands a different approach, a relaxed background architecture where the little things are done very well, rather than an uptight, self-referential, foreground architecture. The creation of background type is selfless on the part of the architect, and far from being a conservative, easy option actually demands greater effort than forming of a loud foreground.

Taken together these three limits of type suggest that housing design should not be initiated by an introverted manipulation of typologies. Types should not be seen as a means of production, but rather as the result of other forms of social and economic production. Types are, in effect, the finishing point and not the starting point.

This demands the housing designer being alert to conditions and forces which may influence the production and occupation of housing. The deluded notion of inventing new typologies (deluded because one can be almost certain that someone, somewhere, sometime, has already designed or evolved what one thinks is original) is replaced by an attitude which pays attention to the new conditions, and then teases re-articulated typologies out of them. This is because typologies are not abstracted entities that exist outside of economic and societal trends but are in fact determined by these very trends. Take the following description of a housing type:

Open plan.
Bedroom as part of the living area.
Kitchen, and sometimes bathroom, on display.
Mixture of old and new structure.
Full-height single-glazed windows.
Situated in run-down inner city industrial areas.

If an architect were to come up with specification they would be dismissed as a dreamer, and yet this is a description of a well-known new housing type, the urban loft. This typology has not been arrived at through the act of intentional design or the will of the architect, but through the coming together of a new set of economic and social conditions in a particular place at a particular time. It is to such conditions that we must be alert.

THE CONDITIONS OF TYPE

The factors that shape public housing are clearly complex, and the following brief description is no more than a summary of some of them. They are not intended as a comprehensive checklist but as a set of prompts of contemporary conditions that may influence the production of housing typologies. These conditions are divided into three categories: demographic trends, procurement & technology, context.

Demographic Trends

Over the next twenty years a sea-change is predicted in United Kingdom housing demographics. It is anticipated that the number of single person households will rise from 5.6 million to 8.5 million, co-habiting households from 1.5 to 2.8 million, and other multi-occupancy households will increase in number by 0.7 million. At the same time the number of family households will decrease from 10.9 million to 9.2 million. These statistics suggest that basing new housing typologies on the cellular family house is no longer tenable. It is necessary to investigate other living patterns afresh, questioning the values and spatial patterns that are inscribed in

the traditional model. There are certain activities common any dwelling – eating, sleeping, bathing, cooking, sitting – but it is open to question as to how much the deployment of these activities for single people should be founded on the model of the family house. The design of the family house also often negates the need for communal spaces between households, but for the non-family households such spaces become important catalysts for interaction and shared resources.

Other trends also emerge from within these demographic statistics. The largest growth of all will be in single-person housing for elderly people, and in particular for women. There are anticipated rises in single parent households, in ethnic minority households and in the numbers of homes for young people who have left home. All of these groupings have specific needs and desires which need imaginative solutions from the providers and designers of housing. There are, for instance, inspiring examples of shared housing for elderly women in Sweden which transcend the institutionalised settings often found in United Kingdom.

Demographic trends are not stable, and the demands and lifestyles of individual users change over time. Both these factors require an architectural response which is adaptive. The ultimately flexible building is an architectural holy grail, often desired for but never fully achieved; in many cases solutions of sliding screens and demountable partitions get ossified into permanent fittings, creating long-term problems since the obsessions with flexibility has been achieved at the expense of other more fundamental issues. A better approach is that advocated by the past president of the RIBA, Alex Gordon, whose aphorism “Long Life, Loose Fit, Low Energy” has real relevance today for housing design. One shining example of this is ADP’s Hellmutstrasse Zurich apartment housing, with its stratified systems of habitation zones that allow the users to determine the layout of their apartments. ADP’s approach is neither deterministic nor completely flexible; it is more *suggestive* of how spaces may be used and adapted over time. However, such adaptive solutions only work with a management structure that can indeed accommodate change – in ADP’s case the apartments are owned and run by a collective. In this context, the future potentials for housing design are determined as much by the management

procedures as by the architect, and any change will require shift from the paternalistic principles that govern so many of our housing providers.

Construction and Procurement

One of the main hindrances on the development of new housing typologies in the UK is the method of procuring and constructing housing. UK housing construction is still dominated by brick and block cavity construction, which on all technological measures is a primitive and unsustainable method of construction, particularly given the steadily increasing standards for thermal insulation. Yet, because it is the tried and tested method it is also the most immediately economic and is proving exceptionally resilient to change. The construction industry is notoriously conservative in accepting innovations, even when they promise gains in efficiency and reductions in costs. Until the industry is required to change its ways (and it appears Egan’s blunt words are not enough) innovative housing technologies such as prefabrication, core service modules, and modular timber systems are going to remain the expensive exception rather than the sensible rule. In the meantime much architectural energy is being expended in paying lip service to such things as prefabrication without really addressing the real issues (and problems) associated with the innovations.

In each case these new technologies may also give rise to re-articulated housing typologies or else allow the development of new housing typologies which have been hitherto restricted by the standard methods of construction. In the former category AHHM’s Peabody Raines Dairy scheme, with its semi-modular construction leads to a small, but significant, tweaking of a standard apartment plan with interesting results. In the latter category, the combination of long span timber construction with core service modules would allow the development of adaptive plans which break away from the cellular organisation imposed by loadbearing blockwork and short-span joist methods.

The method of procurement of housing also effects the eventual design. The introduction of partnering agreements in the public housing sector allows users, designers, clients and contractors to develop new housing types in a collaborative

manner, so that innovation is not stifled through suspicion but encouraged through joint will. Potentially more radical is the role that the user may play at an early stage of the design process. The community architecture of the eighties is a weak version of user interaction, in which a complete deferment to the will of the user often ended up with the reinscription of conservative spatial and aesthetic values under the guise of liberal ethics¹. Much more interesting are contemporary methods of participatory design being developed by groups such as the Architecture Foundation.² These are more aspirational and use the conjoined creativity of user and designer alike, resulting in solutions that are at the same time innovative and appropriate.

Participatory processes resonate with our earlier call for a background architecture, since they too subvert normal architectural processes. Participation challenges the architect's will to control and determine; it questions the role of authorship (on which so much architectural mythology is founded); it introduces a new value system to design. Combine all the factors, and new typologies are likely to arise.

Sustainability

There is a problem in introducing sustainability as a specialised condition of type. The sustainable imperative is clear – we cannot environmentally afford to continue with our present standards of construction and design – but by separating out sustainability as an issue it becomes the other to the mainstream, whereas in fact it should be the mainstream. To get to the stage where sustainable approaches are the norm, we need to stop talking about green architecture (because that denotes an alternative route) and start discussing red architecture. Red architecture is design which overtly betrays environmental principles. Despite buckets of greenwash, red

1 See Jeremy Till, "Architecture of the Impure Community," in *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, ed. Jonathan Hill (London: Routledge, 1998), 61–75.

2 We are referring here to the Architecture Foundation's Creative Space Initiative (<http://www.creativespaces.org.uk/>), as well as methods being developed by the Bureau of Design and Environmental Research at the University of Sheffield School of Architecture.

architecture is presently the vast majority of architecture, but by pointing the finger at it we should hasten the move towards the time when green architecture comes as naturally as breathing (and is never talked about) whereas red architecture is seen as the other, the wrong alternative. In the meantime, we still need to foreground sustainability, in the widest sense of the word, as a condition of type. The conjunction of living and working, reduction of transport, orientation, passive solar design, recycling at every stage of the construction and occupations cycle, embodied energy, water issues, super-insulation – all these and many more factors will effect the way that housing design will develop. However, the danger is that worthy sustainable architecture may also inscribe conservative and restrictive spatial practices. It is important therefore that issues of sustainability are not considered in obsessional isolation, as may be identified in the more extreme 'green' approaches, because this denies the other conditions of type which have just as profound social and environmental impacts.

New Contexts

The final conditions that need to be considered in the development of housing types are the new political and spatial contexts in which housing is being produced. At the political level, we are only just emerging from the devastation imposed by the Thatcherite privatisation of the housing market. Issues such as key worker housing, the expansion of the private rental sector, the reduction of fuel poverty and the regeneration of the public housing sector are back on the political agenda after years of laissez-faire. Along with this political will comes legislation and guidance³, which to varying degrees will affect housing design. In terms of housing typologies, new guidance on permitted densities may have a profound effect, and present a new challenge to architects. High density housing is something of an unknown entity for British designers, brought up as we are on suburban ideals. The immediate response is to go bigger - object buildings planted gawkily in cowering surroundings - but there

3 Most notably the Housing Green Paper of April 2000, the Housing Statement of December 2000 and the Urban White Paper of November 2000 which arose out of the Urban Task Force.

are obviously alternatives - look at continental examples of high density which address issues of the spaces in between, of scale, of new patterns of living. Another new context is that of the brownfield site. Neither urban nor suburban, these sites present fresh opportunities for the designer in terms of hybrid forms. High density and brownfield are just two of the many new conditions that contemporary political and physical landscapes are producing – and they should be seen not as regulatory restrictions but as catalysts for new opportunities.

SUMMARY

These conditions of type are not autonomous; each interacts to a greater or lesser extent with the others, presenting a complex matrix for the designer and suggesting that an obsessional concentration on just one of the conditions will result in a restricted, and restricting, housing model. Although we have identified these conditions as contemporary, they are unfashionably straightforward. There is no mention of post-modern conditions of globalisation, space-time compression, flux, and virtuality, which direct so much contemporary architectural discourse. The spatialities of post-modernism find their most natural expression in the public urban realm – or at least in designer’s speculations of what this realm might formally be – and the imposition of them onto the design of public housing is at best inappropriate, at worst decadent. This is because of the fundamentally ordinary nature of housing design – it concerns the here and now, the everyday, the daily rituals of life. It takes a certain humility on the part of the architect to address these conditions. It also takes a certain humility to reject the invention of abstracted new types (maybe types informed by the richer seams of post-modern discourse) – because in that rejection there is also an acknowledgement of the powerlessness of the architect as the sole determinist of new forms of living. However, it is neither humble nor impotent to face up to the vital forces that shape housing; it is simply realistic. It is in the critical and creative engagement with these forces that empowering contribution of the architect lies – and if that engagement results in the formation of a background type for housing, that is not a sign of failure but the demonstration of an effective response.

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