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Modernity and Housing

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1 Conditions of Modernity

This book is about the architecture of housing in the modern age and, in particular, broaches the question: how can modern housing be made in an appropriate manner? In so doing, it also explores topics of broader theoretical interest in architecture, especially those concerning the cultural enterprise of modernity.

During the past two decades, severe criticism has been leveled at modern housing projects that dot the landscape of many American inner cities, and at the rows of monolithic flats that mark much of Europe's postwar development (figure 1). In spite of many good intentions and, indeed, a certain widespread enthusiasm for early designs, the building of modern housing seems to have floundered among plain unimaginative projects with no character, accommodations ill suited for their occupants, and building complexes with a significant lack of public amenity (figure 2). Curiously, however, there have been relatively few alternative proposals, and most of those have been primarily intent on reconstructing urban housing the way it was once. In an attempt to provide continuity with the past and to recover a lost sense of tradition, past practices and period styles have been closely emulated under the rubric of architectural post-modernity. Unfortunately, this has often proved to be a dubious undertaking on at least two counts. First, it has given little or no recognition to the wholesale character of social change that has taken place between the past period of emulation and present circumstances. Second, the backward-looking orientation has effectively stifled any attempt to remain open to contemporaneous influences, let alone visions of the future. Consequently, if we are modern, as we otherwise seem to be, the question of the architectural accompaniment to this modern condition still seems conspicuously unresolved.



1
Monolithic flats on the
European urban periphery:
the Polygonos of Barcelona.

2
Postwar American public
housing: Stateway Gardens,
Chicago, 1950s.

The book embraces three more or less parallel themes concerning modernity. The first is the rise and rearrangement of the modern technical orientation, which simultaneously compresses the experience of time and expands the experience of space until temporal experience is largely confined to the present and spatial experience becomes universal. The second theme concerns representational issues that arise out of an emphasis on subject-centered reason and relativism in place of a belief in metaphysical foundations, and the third concerns social practices that give rise to the production of mass housing on an unprecedented scale. Broadly speaking, an appreciation of space-time relationships in architecture will philosophically ground discussion of local and traditional building practices as these contrast universal and novel ways of making housing; the perspective of subject-centered reason will focus discussion of the use of abstract forms and the problem of providing authentic architectural expression; while the unprecedented production of housing, especially under conditions of considerable social diversity, raises the thorny issue of widely defining a normative building program for appropriate accommodations—of designing for everyone but for no one in particular. Mass production also simultaneously raises the equally difficult issue of standardization in design.

The time frame for most of the narrative is roughly from the end of World War I until the present day. While many architectural scholars mark the advent of the truly modern era with the rise of the avant-garde around 1910, it is the post-World War I period in housing that coincides with the actual effects of major sociocultural realignments in which widely accepted concepts of space and time were shattered, traditional architectural practices were abandoned, and new social relations were formed. Of particular importance in these regards are two historical moments. They are the postwar building boom from about 1920 to 1930, which witnessed the first widespread application of modern housing in both Europe and the United States; and the period from about 1970 to 1980, when many broadly based underlying conditions of western socioeconomic stability and prosperity were severely threatened. This latter period is also roughly congruent with the ascendancy of so-called postmodern culture, at least in architectural circles. As we shall see, both were self-conscious moments for architecture, when attention was directed inward toward the discipline itself and, as such, when the issue of architecture's presumed modernity was undergoing critical consideration. Moreover, again as we shall see, each period coincides with the predominance of a particular form of modern sense making—one concerned with technological order and universal truth, the other with a much less confident, fragmented, and cir-

cumscribed view. Throughout, for fairly obvious reasons of commonality and influence, the account, with one or two exceptions, will be confined to western Europe and North America.

Finally, among key examples of modern housing in each of the two periods other interesting symmetries can be seen to emerge. During the period between the World Wars, for instance, most notable modern housing estates were built in suburban and peripheral locations (figure 3). This is not surprising, given the unprecedented horizontal mobility that became available and the rather obvious cure for urban blight and squalor to be found in the countryside. By contrast, during the second period of the 1970s, emphasis primarily shifted to redevelopment of older urban areas largely abandoned by years of outward urban expansion. Also of interest is the parallel rise and subsequent collapse of modern housing programs in numerous technologically advanced nations. Beginning after World War I, with obvious interruptions during the Depression years and World War II, housing production followed a strong upward trend, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of population growth, until a period between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s when it either plummeted or sagged conspicuously. The general trend was much the same for each nation, as if the sheer limitations of a way of technologically engaging the world had been reached. Modern housing production largely coincided with the “second industrial revolution” and an emphasis on the management of throughput. When that was replaced during the dramatic technological rearrangements of the seventies, earlier housing programs were either abandoned or fell into disrepute.



3
Housing estates on the
suburban fringe: Römerstadt
in Frankfurt by Ernst May,
1925–1930.