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Modernity and Housing

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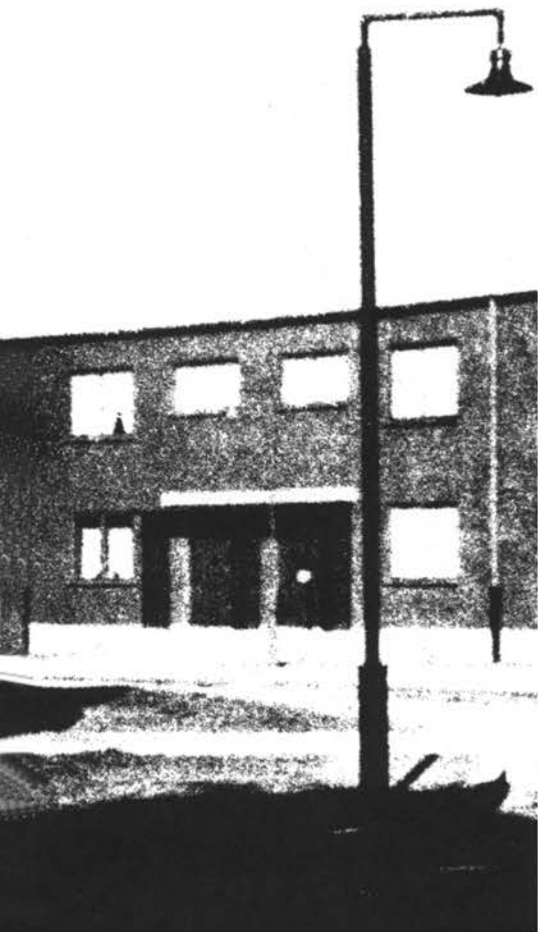
2 Modern Housing on the Rise, 1920–1930



The rise of modern housing coincided with the second industrial revolution, the demise of the old sociopolitical order, especially in Europe, and a new vision for community settlement. These three circumstances did not fully align simultaneously, however. The course of human events is rarely quite so tidy. Rather, they came together over a period of 25 to 30 years, beginning slightly before the turn of the century. Nevertheless, after the close of World War I, and certainly during a short prosperous span of years from 1925 to 1930, the die was cast, so to speak, and modern housing came of age.

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Application of garden city precepts at Letchworth by Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, 1903–1919.

As we saw in chapter 1, prior to 1900 the production of housing was considerably industrialized in both the United States and Europe. Parts were manufactured in central locations and shipped to remote building sites for assembly into complete units. Industrialization was a way of making existing things quicker, more efficiently, and at greater profit. Nevertheless, the appearance and layout of houses went largely unaffected, still conforming to nineteenth-century neoclassical, romantic, and vernacular ideals.

This orientation was to change, however, when modern process management techniques, pioneered by Taylor and others in the second industrial revolution, were applied to housing. Suddenly the planning, physical layout, and shape of houses became subjects of rational technical scrutiny rather than simply following the cultural norms of Victorian, *Gründerzeit*, or Wilhelmine society. Moreover, the effect on housing of other concurrent technological developments of the second industrial revolution, such as private automobile transportation and electrification, also became highly consequential.

With World War I, the passing of the old aristocratic order in Europe was accompanied by the rise of numerous egalitarian and democratic political movements. At the outset many were to founder. In Germany, for example, there was a stormy period until the Weimar Republic came into its own shortly before the end of 1924. There and elsewhere, however, socialist causes became established, strongly focusing attention on the welfare of the working class and the poor, including housing. The late twenties were, nevertheless, a sober and more skeptical counterpart to the social ferment and optimism of the immediate postwar years (Friedrich 1972, Willett 1978).

Although the timing of the situation in the United States was somewhat different, here too there was a focus on mass housing. The period of pronounced social reform, usually referred to as the Progressive Era, dated from around the turn of the century and had almost run its course by 1917. Many other social reforms, including more universal suffrage, however, were to occur in the twenties, which by and large were a period of conservative prosperity.

The new vision of community settlement that emerged on both sides of the Atlantic primarily combined garden city precepts of physical planning and social organization with a freedom to explore architecturally the new technical opportunities of building. From Ebenezer Howard's *Tomorrow*

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of 1898 and the early garden city experiments at Letchworth (figure 51) and Welwyn by Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, the idea developed of large satellite communities on the outskirts of existing cities, which were at once to be well-planned, largely self-sufficient, and perpetually ringed by green space.

Almost simultaneously, architecture, like other cultural fields at the time, became released from traditional iconographic responsibilities toward metaphysical foundations and could now be developed in exploration of a more autonomous existence. The spirit of *die neue Sachlichkeit* (the new objectivity, or realism) that emerged (figure 52) represented a dispassionate attempt to look at things as they were and to advance, practically speaking, avant-garde artistic ideas from preceding modern movements (Gay 1968, Willett 1978). Architects and planners immediately took advantage of the new freedoms of expression, and the fruits of their labors in modern housing quickly became evident.

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The spirit of *die neue Sachlichkeit* at the Weissenhofsiedlung by J. J. P. Oud, 1925–1927.

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