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Modernity and Housing

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3 Modern Housing in Crisis and Transition, 1970–1980



The pent-up demand of the post–World War II era, coupled with improved technological means of production, resulted in a housing boom throughout much of the United States and Europe. The timing of the recovery varied from place to place, largely according to local economic conditions. Nevertheless, in most places prewar levels were quickly matched and then exceeded after the cessation of hostilities. As during the previous recovery from world conflict, housing production was aided by governmental actions, many of which were already well established. Modern methods of creating housing from the twenties and thirties were now pressed further, largely without interruption.

The contemporary emergence of high-rise residential tower and slab blocks, as well as the ready proliferation of tract developments, began to change the domestic landscape in many postwar towns and metropolitan areas on both sides of the Atlantic. Horizontal mobility increased in many places, again continuing prewar trends and often drastically changing patterns of urban dwelling density and spatial distribution. A search for appropriate levels and scales of design activity ensued among architects and planners, with speculation frequently extending into the realm of mass housing and integrated subsystems of urban functions. It was a period in which the idea of being able to devise and build large and complex urban projects was advanced with confidence. Furthermore, modern production and management techniques were expected to fully meet any lingering housing shortages.

By the late sixties if not before, and certainly after the first oil shock in 1973, these attitudes and this confidence began to change dramatically. Especially when it came to the making of housing, certain simplifying assumptions that formerly appeared necessary for high-volume housing production were called into question. For one thing, a cultural heterogeneity of user groups and user needs began to emerge, demanding revision of many accepted modern canons about standardization and the type of decision making that lay behind housing production. For another, development by rote of technically efficient though architecturally reduced housing, no matter at what volume, was becoming clearly unacceptable. Development and progress were not that inextricably intertwined; people, it appeared, needed more than simply a place to live (figure 129). They needed a home, an environment they could call their own and associate proudly with a broader sociocultural enterprise. Too narrow an extrapolation of modern housing, along with many other forms of contemporary building, had resulted in overdetermination, misfit, and a crisis of meaning.

On a broader policy front, many nations began to recognize a chronic inability to meet rising demands for adequate housing, either through direct provision or through market subsidies. Furthermore, the continued escalation of large-scale plans and housing initiatives proved too crude and inflexible for local socioeconomic and environmental circumstances. Consequently, in the early 1970s few western countries had a housing policy that was not in disarray. The sweeping programs, which had begun more modestly between the world wars, finally ran out of promise and were abandoned.



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Development by rote of technically efficient yet architecturally reduced housing: public housing in South Boston.

During the years that followed, and especially in the span between 1975 and 1980, a broad transition in the way housing was conceptualized and made became strongly evident, both in the United States and abroad. Local determination and local provision of housing were now more than a matter of lip service; they became a distinct mandate. Consequently, the scale and scope of projects were decreased and particularized. Prevailing context, for example, became a more important consideration in design than it had been previously (figure 130), and the role of broad master planning in both physical and policy terms was abandoned in favor of more localized and strategic interventions. Simultaneously, attempts to recover more familiar or less alien forms of architecture emerged from several different

quarters. Various kinds of historicism on the one hand, and an open-ended allowance for multiple perspectives on another, became particularly important forms of design development at this time, as did a return to rationalism and an emphasis on design process. The foundational aspect of modern architecture was abandoned and another side of modernity began to assert itself. In many of the examples that follow from this period, these nonfoundational and pluralistic design emphases can be seen to have liberated, once again, the possibility of good modern housing.



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Local and contextual housing interventions: an apartment building by Hans Hollein in the Rauchstrasse block of Berlin's IBA program, 1980.