

## Reformed Modernism

By the beginning of the decade of the 1970s, if not before, the modern system of housing provision envisaged some fifty years earlier had collapsed. In one western country after another, despite obvious national differences and concepts of dwelling, the result was much the same. The modern experiment with housing, largely based on the fruits of the second industrial revolution, had reached a dead end. Although not a failure in the sense of a sharp rending of the social fabric, it was a failure nevertheless, as a profound lack of confidence set in regarding the ability to comprehensively manage urban affairs and to plot the course of future events.

In the architecture of modern housing two rather substantial shifts in orientation began to occur. First, the universality and constancy of earlier modernism's progressive vision of the world was altered dramatically in favor of a discourse about the very process of change itself, which in turn could lead in the direction of more heterogeneous future possibilities. Essentially, the stasis of the modern progressive projection of a living environment as an agent of change gave way to a concern for the process through which other less well articulated alternatives might be reached. Second, there was a fundamental shift in thinking about the scope of reasonable housing provision. This was not so much a lowering of expectations, although that often happened also, as it was a more realistic reckoning with the sheer complexity of the issues involved. There was, for instance, a clear and unequivocal withdrawal from omnibus approaches under which large areas of cities and large segments of urban affairs were depicted and managed. In a kind of back to basics movement, a strong preference was voiced for local initiatives and specific projects.

This reformation of modernism, for it can probably be called that, produced an architecture (as demonstrated at least partially in the last three projects) that seemed simultaneously to recognize new aspects of the space-time dimension of dwelling environments and the not unrelated need for user autonomy. Indeed, one could even say that self-determination and housing for people were embodied in the very architectural substance and expressive capacity of a reformed modernism: an architecture in which what was being depicted took on a renewed importance.



228  
The promise of change in the Byker's kit of parts.

More specifically, two emphases or directions emerged, as alluded to above. The first was an interest in the representation of change and the concomitant possibilities of difference that could be wrought. The second was an interest in place, locale, and context, primarily as means of establishing a stronger sense of cultural continuity with the past.

As we saw in the last three examples, the representation of change as the subject of architectural speculation could take on several different complexions. At the Byker Redevelopment, for instance, the very promise of change was clearly represented by an architectural kit of parts (figure 228). Even if the kit of parts was not actually operable, the depiction could certainly have the effect of turning general discussion toward notions of change and, by implication, toward the crucial question of self-determination. Moreover, it entertained the prospect of such change both at the level of the collective and at the level of the individual home occupant. By almost direct contrast, the architecture of the Malagueira Quarter presented a blank canvas, so to speak, a necessary framework that seemed to invite embellishment and transformation (figure 229). Throughout, there



229  
The Malagueira's blank canvas inviting embellishment.

appears to have been an underlying assumption that whatever the future shape and appearance of the residential neighborhoods might be, they would certainly differ from the original form. Somewhat less obviously, perhaps, the architecture of Villa Victoria presented a dialectical set of images that pointed in the direction of social change. Local row house vernacular and allusions to suburbia combined to both address present aspirations on the part of inhabitants and suggest a continued pattern of social mobility within the mainstream of American life (figure 230). In all three cases, a preoccupation can be seen with articulating the process of changing the community, and hence with providing a sense of local empowerment.

A concern for the substance and representation of change, in lieu of the projection of some future vision of the world, is also clearly evident in the indeterminacy of the projects. In at least two cases, the Malagueira and the Byker, incompleteness, especially of the more public realm, was a deliberate strategy. Room was set aside within and between the dwelling environments for future accommodation of public facilities, community areas, and needed sections of infrastructure. At work was also a clear recognition that the temporal frame of reference for the public realm is usually larger than for individual private developments, where far less consensus and deliberation are required. The provision of such room for renegotiating can have the effect of empowering inhabitants through the prospect of future change in their dwelling circumstances, and making possible a sense of solidarity from having arrived at such decisions. In neither case, however, was the prospect of future change left unbounded. A broad frame of reference was provided by initial stages of development. To do otherwise would have run the risk of conceptually aligning the prospect of change with the far more disquieting conditions of uncertainty, disorientation, and alienation.

A reemphasis of place can also be seen in these examples that clearly departs from earlier modernist doctrine. The architecture of Villa Victoria, especially in its row house form, prominent front stoops, and extensive brickwork, clearly established a link to the modern context of Boston's South End. Within the project there was also an attempt made to create around the main plaza a sense of place specifically related to the culture of the residents. At Byker, the extensive preservation of long-time institutions and institutional settings instantaneously established a matrix of places with special significance, even though the remainder of the project was almost entirely new. The steadfast resistance to social displacement and the deliberate maintenance of neighborhood ties and attachments during the relocation process also helped to quickly cohere a familiar

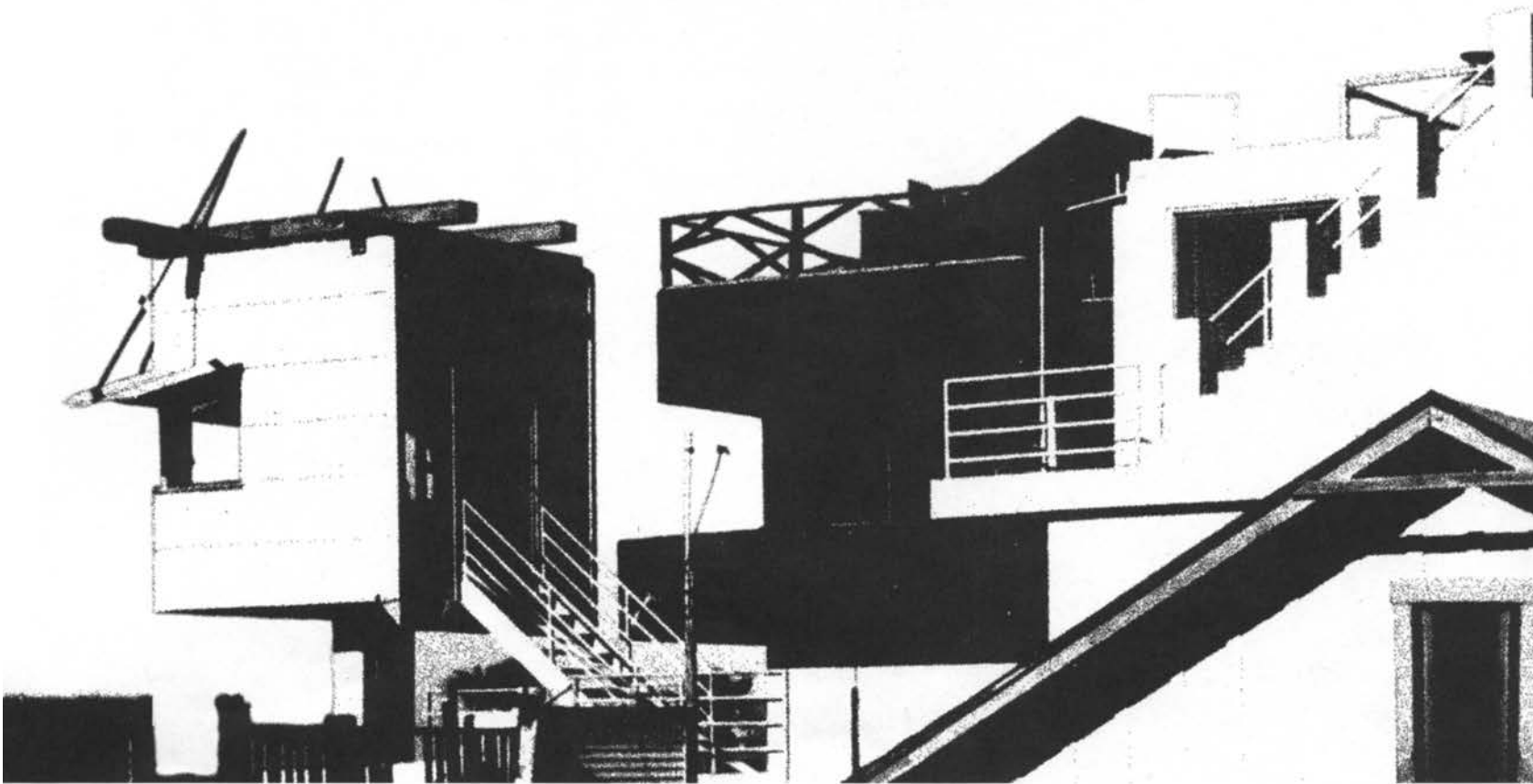
sense of belonging, if not of place in the literal sense of the word. Finally, at the Malagueira, although less literally than in the other two examples, constant references were made to the traditional form and environs of Evora.

These examples suggest two general approaches to providing a sense of place. One is by way of direct reference to past institutions or elements of the local context, for example by actually maintaining the institutions in place, or by the deployment of iconographic references to a particularly significant local epoch. The other and perhaps more robust approach is the use of a heterogeneous text of local references. Here the diversity seems to offer an increased likelihood of a sympathetic reception. It also allows any invidious and perhaps unforeseen symbolic distinctions between particular temporal and spatial references to be conveniently blurred.

The results of this reformation of modernism have the potential for a thoroughgoing reaffirmation of tradition in its most culturally productive sense. It is no longer the strictly bioptical view of tradition seen solely by virtue of, or by contrast with, a new vision of the future. The inherent notion of *bringing across*, so crucial to tradition as a form of guidance, no longer relies upon the contrast between past and present practices and those of some different set of conditions, whether the latter are rooted in the past or in the future. Such a use of tradition is essentially open-ended, allowing the character of future habitable environments to remain indeterminate and, therefore, subject to later sustained negotiation by users. It is also less universal by remaining firmly anchored, so to speak, in a specific place and prevailing cultural circumstances.



230  
Villa Victoria: row house  
tradition yet allusion to  
suburbia.





This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/4727.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/4727.001.0001)

# Modernity and Housing

By: Peter G. Rowe

## Citation:

*Modernity and Housing*

By: Peter G. Rowe

DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/4727.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/4727.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262367912

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 1995

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from The National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.



The MIT Press

First MIT Press paperback edition, 1995

© 1993 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

Credit line: Postwar mass production of single-family homes in the United States. Copyright William A. Garnett Estate. Published with permission from the Jay M. Garnett and Nancy J. Garnett Revocable Trust.

Open access edition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The text of this book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

This book was set in Rockwell and Melior by DEKR Corporation and was printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rowe, Peter G.

Modernity and housing / Peter G. Rowe.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-262-18151-7 (HB), 0-262-68087-4 (PB)

1. Housing—History—20th century—Case studies. 2. Housing development—History—20th century—Case studies. 3. Architecture, Domestic—History—20th century—Case studies.

I. Title.

HD7287.R68 1993

363.5'09'04—dc20

92-45140  
CIP