

## AMBIGUITIES OF THE ESTATE

### Robin Evans

The housing estate has been the architectural centrepiece of Labour policies to improve the lot of the working class since the 30s. Of all the amenities promised and delivered it has been the most prominent; so prominent indeed that vast districts of major cities are made of little else than an accumulation of estates. Some Labour dominated areas of south and east London, for instance, are like living museums of the changing species of housing deemed appropriate in successive decades.

According to some the whole modern world is modelled on the architecture of the housing estate. Tom Wolfe in *From Bauhaus to Our House* alleges that modern architecture in its entirety is the result of architects making everything from prestige office blocks to millionaires' winter retreats in the image of worker housing in an unlimited competition to see who could be most non-bourgeois. The idea is not difficult to refute but the mere fact that it plays such a large part in Wolfe's slapstick lunge at the architectural establishment points to its apparent plausibility. If you want to anathematise modern architecture all you have to do is show how close is its association with housing — not just any old housing mind you, but worker housing. This is the tendency of the new architectural Right, much in evidence lately. In this country David

Watkin and Roger Scruton bring a similar brand of intellectual McCarthyism to bear on modern building in their baleful lamentations over the passing of classicism, good taste and aristocratic patronage.

The circumstantial evidence would indeed suggest that the housing estate is the child of a liaison between the political Left and the modern movement. As it happens it was not. The real story is very different. Housing achieved its contemporary definition largely during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The term 'housing' itself was not used to describe the large scale production of domestic accommodation until **the 1840s** when **housing** the labouring classes became a hot **political** issue closely tied up with the parallel demands for sewage disposal and crime control.

In Britain the housing movement can be split into three phases in all of which the general aims were more or less the same, but during which the attitude toward the working classes as tenants altered substantially. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries the only provision of model housing for labourers had been supplied by philanthropic landowners on their rural estates. In the cities no such attempts were made to alter the circumstances of daily life and although there was a growing sense that the backlands, rookeries and slums of the great towns

were potentially dangerous, they were as often portrayed as scenes of amusement and rather mucky, dubious pleasures.

Collectively the poor were not the subjects of pity or fear so much as subjects of parody. In the 1840s their reputation and the portrayal of their haunts changed markedly. Now they were dangerous: not, mark you, dangerous in a political but in a physical sense. Their diseases, their violence and their immorality threatened to spill out of the super-condensed slums to infect others. In these slums, they were reported to live a life beyond the reach of civilization. This

idea was taken so seriously as to produce, in later years, a long forgotten pseudo-science called urban ethnography in which the lives of these aliens were observed in the same way as one might observe the lives of savages in remote corners of the empire. To characterise the findings of the first generation of reformers one might say that the slum-dweller lived a gregarious life in which the spatial definition of events played no part. There was no discrimination between public or private space between one family or another, between one event and another. This lack of discrimination of space corresponded to an

equally amorphous psyche and indiscriminate appetite — a common heritage of the slum-dweller. To this period belonged the development of an architectural counter-strategy.

The first thing was to demolish the slums; eradicate them from the face of the earth. This was done with the aid of new street cuttings and railways (would you believe that the worst slum in London was obliterated by New Oxford Street in 1847?). The second was to devise dwellings for the poor to live a proper, organised, decent life rather than the dissolute, diseased amorphous

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**PUBLISHING**

existence of the slums. This was accomplished by the construction of model blocks by charity companies of which the Peabody Trust remains the best known. Dwellings like these literally mapped out a new style of life for their occupants, more domesticated and private. The third move was to clean up the back streets and other public spaces by making sure that they were restricted to traffic and purposeful movement only.

George Godwin, editor of *The Builder* in the 1850s, wrote several books about the slums. It is a gauge of the significance of the new subject of housing the poor that God-

"Waking" the Dead and Killing the Living.



Death in the slums — the changing perceptions of the poor. Above: two illustrations from George Godwin's *Another Blow for Life* published in 1864, and, below: 'A Domestic Tragedy' from E Sims' *How the Poor Live* published in 1883. In the early example the poor are a congregate threatening mass, in the later solitary and pitiful.

win would share his career between sanitary and moral investigation and more conventional architectural subjects such as the great cathedrals and the pyramids. Likewise the author of the following piece, William Hosking, first professor of architecture at University College, extended the boundaries of architecture to cover new social territory. Part of his contribution on architecture for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was approvingly reproduced by Godwin:

"In laying out a town," says the writer, "there need be no mere lounging-places provided, such as the paved area of Trafalgar-square, in London, or as the *place* so common in the towns and cities of the Continent. Markets should be provided for in sheltered and inclosed buildings, and not held in a *place*, and a more than equivalent for the *place*, or even the village-green, ought to be provided for outdoor recreation, and it may be, rest; but wholly irrespective of business. To this effect plots of

from five to ten acres each, making in all not less than one-tenth of the whole area, should be reserved in laying out a town, or in adding to a town; such plots being so disposed as not to be more than a short half-mile apart. With such a provision in a town, idle men and boys may be reasonably required by the police to "move on;" and, with almost equal advantage to children and to the community at large, the trundling of hoops in the streets may be prohibited; whilst river or sea-side quays for business, or terraces for pleasure, need not be the permitted haunts of thieves and beggars.

So goodbye to the theatre of the street,

A Very Sick Room.



everything must be in its designated circumscribed space, just as in the model home. This is a learned contribution on the subject of architecture remember, not policing or social policy.

The second phase of housing reform from the 1880s to the turn of the century continued to apply similar techniques of architecture and planning, but attitudes towards the existing state of the poor shifted. They became victims of a debilitating lassitude. The harrowing scenes of the 1890s are not the lively scenes of crime and depravity of the 40s and 50s but scenes of hopeless despair. The one remaining danger from the

working classes was that they might in their despair be driven to socialism. Reformers at this end of the century would appeal to a quite different logic to prove the need for more building. It was still a way of uplifting the poor but their complicity could now be relied upon with greater certainty. They *wanted* better homes and quieter streets. The mid-century reformers had wanted to teach the lower classes to live differently. To them architecture and planning were didactic instruments to be wielded against the predominant desires of prospective tenants. By the end of the century it was difficult to tell who was doing what for whom and why. Not only this, but the sources of degradation, now the old style rookeries were more or less extinct, were being traced to the tenement blocks that had been built to supercede them. As Charles Booth put it 'The block becomes a sort of Pandemonium'. A more private and dispersed solution would be preferable.

The third phase was the municipalisation of the estates. When the London County Council was formed in 1889 they made plans to remove the last of the insular intemperate rookeries — the Jago in Shoreditch. They piled all the rubble from the 17 acres of demolished buildings into the centre of the site and turned it, like fairies with a magic wand, into a little miniature hillside garden. Since then the association between left wing local politics and housing provision has become closer and closer till now the commodity is virtually identified with Labour policy. At this stage decent housing is a right to be demanded.

So, the housing estate, and all the ideals it translates falteringly into practice, got its definition between 1840 and 1900 but neither socialist politicians nor modern architects for that matter had much of a formative role to play in its creation. Who did? Well, Tom Wolfe got it wrong: it was the dear old bourgeoisie, was it not? So no wonder they kept trying to do everything else the same way.

Is all this just quibbling about who did what first? If it is true that the kind of housing we have now was taken up by the Left as a ready-made, even a slightly shop soiled commodity at the turn of the century, and if it can be shown that this ready-made commodity had been produced as part of a campaign to pacify both public and private life, then is it not possible for us to ask the simple question as to what socialist housing would be like? When the mentality of depression lifts, as it will, and when housing once again becomes an issue, then perhaps we may hold out the hope that it will be a *different* issue.