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Forum 8 Future of Large European Housing Estates

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Presentation: Quality of Living in British and East European Large Housing Estates

Introduction

With this presentation I would like to add the context of a West European country to the debate on large housing estates. I intend to draw some comparisons between the East and West European approaches to estate regeneration. Then I will point out some of the issues affecting the quality of life for the residents.

At the outset, I must stress that, when considering housing quality, a multitude of issues have to be taken into consideration. These are reaching far beyond just technical and aesthetic concerns and also include urban, environmental, social, managerial, economic and political issues. It is necessary to understand the complexity affecting housing and to be aware of the interdependencies between all these factors.

Background to British Large Housing Estates

Traditionally, British people were used to living in houses rather than multiple occupancy flats. The desire to own a house with a garden is expressed in the well known quote 'My Home is My Castle'.

After the Second World War, the British government proclaimed the improvement of housing conditions and promised a better quality of life for the working class. Local authorities built large quantities of housing stock for rent, replacing the dilapidated Victorian terraced houses. To achieve the required volume of new housing, prefabricated construction systems were used to create large estates in a short period of time. Le Corbusier's concept of treating 'the house as a machine to live in' was suitably adapted for this newly acquired method of housing construction. It is interesting to note that each local authority designed their own housing types, but all used prefabrication methods.

People were forced into renting flats in multi-storey blocks despite them favouring owner occupation and low rise houses.

Comparisons between British and East European Estates

Living on large housing estates was never the preferred housing choice for the British people. Renting was perceived only as a temporary option, with the ultimate aim being to own a property.

On the contrary, East Europeans have a tradition of living in apartment buildings. The main housing choice in urban locations was between old apartment houses and newly built blocks of flats. The former provided a low standard of accommodation but the buildings had architectural quality and were located in areas with established infrastructure. The latter had modern amenity dwellings but were on large estates often suffering from poor urban quality.

The external appearance of large housing blocks in Britain is similar to those in Eastern Europe due to the industrialised construction systems using concrete and steel. However, in Britain the building systems were also applied to low-rise accommodation. Therefore, a greater variety of housing types exist on British estates ranging from low-rise terraced houses via medium-rise maisonettes to high-rise blocks.

It is worth noting that in Britain the majority of large housing estates were built in the 1950s and 60s. This predates East Europe by 15 to 20 years.

British estates are generally smaller than those in East Europe and comprise in total no more than 3-5% of the country's overall housing stock. In East European countries large housing estates used to provide homes for about one third of the population and therefore play a significant part in the overall housing provision.

Issues Affecting Quality of Life

Out of many factors, I wish to discuss five issues here, which I consider to be important for the quality of life on large European housing estates:

1. Image

In Britain, large housing estates have from their inception been aimed to provide social housing, accommodating the people who are unable to afford home ownership. Today, mainly socially disadvantaged groups, such as unemployed, elderly, immigrants, single parent families and social problem cases tend to occupy the estates.

This single-sided social profile together with the discrepancy between the architects' design philosophy of communal living and the occupants' attitude towards living in this manner has contributed to an image of 'second class' housing. This stigma has manifested into a major problem for large housing estates in Britain. Structural and aesthetic deficiencies added further to the tenants' dissatisfaction. The occupants themselves often contribute to the poor image. High crime rates, vandalism and antisocial behaviour impinge upon the quality of life to such an extent that entire estates became 'no-go-zones' for outsiders.

In East European countries, large housing estates are more accepted by the general public compared to Britain. People value the amenities in the flats and the ease of maintenance. However, with the development of free housing markets, the social profile is declining due to the migration of higher income households. Consequently, crime rates are rising and insecurity is growing. Similar image problems as in Britain are becoming apparent in East Europe leading to a decline in the quality of life for the remaining residents. Investment, not only in housing refurbishment but also in establishing businesses, infrastructure and recreational facilities in the areas is essential to prevent the image from further deterioration.

2. Building Defects

In Britain, after the Ronan Point disaster (when a gas explosion led to the progressive collapse of the entire corner of a concrete panel block causing five fatalities) the government provided grants to local authorities for remedial works on large housing estates. Since the 1990s, a more radical approach is being adopted to multi-storey housing blocks, which have also been instrumental in causing social problems. This is the complete demolition of entire blocks. However, the need for affordable rented

housing still remains. This proved to be an expensive option, as the demolished dwelling units need replacement requiring additional resources.

In East Europe, one can say that the more recent the construction of the housing estate, the worse the quality of the buildings. This was caused by a reduced build time, financial pressures and unmotivated workers who increasingly lowered the quality of construction towards the late 1980s. Physical deterioration of the buildings has to be anticipated in years to come. The problem is exaggerated by the high proportion of housing stock on large estates in East Europe. Large-scale demolition cannot be considered as an option. Financing the repair of building defects will become an all-important issue. Due to the scale of the problem, the impact on the countries' economies must not be underestimated.

3. Architectural Quality

Initially, to produce housing quickly and cheaply, estates were built using only a limited number of building types. This often led to monotonous housing areas, which were unpopular with inhabitants. The aesthetic appearance of the housing blocks in context with their surrounding contributes greatly towards the environmental quality of the estate and consequently, to the quality of living for the residents. The following examples illustrate various efforts to improving external appearance and urban surroundings of large housing estates without demolishing entire buildings. It must be stressed, however, that these 'cosmetic' improvements have to be regarded as only a small contribution to estate regeneration activities.

Tight finances often prevent the redesign of all facades in high architectural quality. However, transformations of concrete panel buildings in strategic locations throughout an estate enhance its environmental quality and attract outsiders. Local residents seem to take pride in being associated with such innovative developments. Focal points can include eye-catching façades, modified roofscapes and entrances or specific green areas:

'Les fenêtres de Balzac' / Paris: In this French estate, 3 big holes were punched through a 16 storey concrete housing block creating large 'urban windows' of 4 storey height. The inside of the windows was lined with reflective material to improve the lighting on ground level.

Martin-Luther-Gymnasium / Wittenberg: The artist-architect Hunderwasser transformed this concrete fabricated school which since has become a tourist attraction. The project also proved that the appearance of concrete panel buildings could be altered effectively whilst maintaining the structural system.

Groß Klein / Rostock: Landscaping the surrounding area and areas between blocks, allowing the foliage to cover parts of buildings can also be very effective. It is a cheap option but takes time to establish itself and show positive results.

Sachsendorf / Cottbus: A slab block on the estate was completely dismantled. The concrete panels were recycled and reused for constructing five houses on the original foundations. This example demonstrates a resourceful way of dealing with unwanted or vacant buildings. At the same time, the project provided homes for private ownership and enhanced the variety of building types on the estate.

New town / Birmingham: The British example teaches lessons about the quality of redesign schemes. Cheap and badly designed 'improvements' will not achieve a better

urban quality of the estate. Moreover, poor designed security measures have often added to the tenants' concerns. Parks and play areas surrounded by high fences for maximum security resulted in few people utilising these facilities. Security cameras visibly attached to building facades are intimidating for residents.

4. Privatisation

The privatisation administered by the British government in the 1980s led to the sale of the most attractive sections of the publicly rented housing stock. The 'right to buy' policy allowed tenants to acquire their dwelling at a subsidised rate. The reason for privatisation was to hand over the responsibility of repairs and maintenance to the new owners. A lot of problems arose from this piecemeal privatisation sale. Many owners had to deal with severe structural defects with large financial implications. In some cases, the privatised housing fell into disrepair due to lack of investment, thereby reducing the quality of life on large housing estates for both private occupants and council tenants. Indeed, some owners sued the council for the costs of repairs with the effect that local authorities were forced to buy back the properties.

The consequence of this privatisation policy was that the local authorities as social housing providers were left with the worst parts of their housing stock, most of which was multi-storey accommodation.

Management problems arose when in the same block some dwellings were owner-occupied and others rented. In this case it was difficult to co-ordinate and fund refurbishment and maintenance applicable to the entire block, resulting in postponing the activities or abandoning them altogether.

In the mid 1990s, the concept of privatisation to the occupants was also applied to East European countries, i.e. Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Municipalities, faced with the prospect of expensive large-scale refurbishment, escaped their responsibility for tackling the physical problems by selling the flats. Many residents took this opportunity as an investment for the future. However, the awareness of poor building quality leads to serious questions. If extensive repairs become necessary- who will coordinate remedial works? Who will pay for them? What happens if some households are not able to afford the costs? Housing management companies did not exist at the time of sale. They need to be established urgently to take on board such issues and organise finance schemes.

An interesting approach to financing refurbishments was found in The Hague/ Netherlands. On the roofs of existing 4 storey blocks, the Haagwonen Housing Corporation constructed penthouses, which were sold privately. The profits from these sales were used to upgrade the original dwellings. Besides the financial benefits, the scheme contributed positively to mixing tenure types on the estate.

5. Tenants' Participation

Housing can only be successful when occupants take an interest in it. A dwelling is not just a tool -as Le Corbusier defined it- but a cultural asset and valuable possession. Therefore, the active participation of the residents in decisions concerning their housing, be it the individual dwelling, the communal areas in and outside the building or the surrounding estate, is essential.

East European countries have an advantage, as people are more prepared to take responsibility and a greater sense of community exists. In Britain the situation is more

complicated due to the attitudes towards rented housing and the biased social profile. Moreover, the tenancy contracts do not help this situation. Council owned dwellings have to be left in the same condition as they were found. Individual alterations are not permitted, even if they increase the value of the property. This prevents tenants from developing their own identity and sense of belonging to their living space.

In terms of collective decision-making on an estate level, the rights of tenants have gradually increased in Britain. In the 1970s and 80s for the first time, tenants had to be consulted in decisions concerning their housing environment. In the early 1990s tenants were asked to actively participate in the decision making process. An example for this is the choice of landlords. Tenants on large housing estates were given three options. They could remain in local authority ownership, transfer to a non-profit-making housing company or manage the housing themselves. In the latter case, Tenant Management Organisations (TMO) have been formed which receive funds from the local authority. The TMO decides independently on how to use the available resources most effectively to the maximum benefit for all residents. Professionals and housing officers now working on behalf of the tenants, fulfilling their requirements.

Conclusion

Despite the different circumstances, which once led to the construction of large housing estates, there are some similar issues impacting upon housing quality in East Europe and Britain. Although the countries can learn from the experiences of others and take inspiration from each other, there will not be universal solutions for a successful future of the estates. Each one needs its own tailor-made approach to regeneration.