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Reviews

Miles Glendinning, Mass Housing: Modern Architecture and State Power — a Global History

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Texte intégral

¹  In recent years, architectural historians have started to move beyond a negative appreciation for modernist mass housing architecture that has been dismissed because of its lack of architectural ambitions, or has been cast aside as ideologically

compromised.¹ This rising interest for modern mass housing estates and the government policies that shaped them have led to various insightful publications, such as Fourcaut and Dufaux's *Le monde des grands ensembles*², Florian Urban's *Tower and Slab*³, Bloom's *Public housing myths*⁴ and Glendinning's own *Tower Block*⁵ and *Towers for the Welfare State*.⁶ Unfortunately, these publications focus mainly on the experiences of just one country or region, depriving the reader thus of a fuller account of modernism, mass housing, in its multiple national manifestations. Gaia Caramellino and Federico Zanfi have made a valuable effort for a comparable international narrative in their insightful 2015's *Post-War Middle-Class Housing*.⁷ Recently, a COST Action "Middle-Class Mass Housing (MCMH)" is broadening up this scope even more by including mass housing models in Africa, South America and Asia.⁸ However, most of these existing publications remain case based, and still struggle to fully disclose overarching transnational accounts of modernist mass housing.

2 Glendinning's *Mass Housing* provides the first-ever comprehensive overview of what was built in the vast modernist housing movement, and why. The publication is not a survey of vernacular building or folk tradition, but "a historical narrative of epic proportions, a dramatic story involving highly professionalized or political actors in all its key roles, and drawing on the deepest driving-forces and anxieties of society" (Glendinning, *Mass Housing*, p. 1). Glendinning convincingly studies the evolution of modern mass housing as a "Hundred Years' War": a century-long succession of campaigns across the world, "prosecuted with military passion and military standards of strategic planning, yet also shaped on the ground by tactical decision-making formulating policy opportunistically rather than cumulatively" (Glendinning, *Mass Housing*, p. 3).

3 Throughout the book, the author outlines how state-sponsored low-income housing is both an outcome and a vehicle of expanding state power, which reaches its peak in the emergence of the social provision in the post WWII period (the "Welfare state"). The book makes a geographical division of the globe using the "Three Estates" logic of Alfred Sauvy: the First World reflecting the Western capitalist countries, the Second World symbolizing the Communist bloc, and the Third World representing all "other" (developing) states that are non-aligned with the First or Second world.⁹ Although Glendinning explicitly calls Sauvy's three worlds "an oversimplification," he argues that this division not only reflects a geography, but also an internal global chronology of the post-war mass housing drive, in which the First World programmes precede those of Second and Third World. In order to tackle both this chronological narrative and the geographical diversity, the book is divided into three major chronological parts that comprise various geographical chapters. Part 1 reflects on the coordinated narrative of the build-up period to WWII (chapters 1-2), while Part 2 reflects on the broad (geographical) scope of mass housing in the post war period. Part 2 is the dominant part of the publication and covers the world's chief regions of mass housing production while stressing the particular conditions in each individual nation (chapters 3-16). Finally, Part 3 (chapters 17-18) brings the wide geographical narrative back together again and contemplates on the uncertain years after 1989.

4 The first part of the book elaborates on the "pre-modernist" architectural and planning models, and their underlying housing policies from the mid-nineteenth century until 1945. This period was defined by constant alterations of wars, revolutions, communism and fascism, which made the old urban fabric and 19th-century private rental housing tenure obsolete. Glendinning discusses in this part the rising maturity of mass housing programmes, which contained disparities and even stimulating contrasts, but still embodied a remarkable common thread of increased state intervention and rapidly spreading international networks of housing reformers and conferences. Housing became part of a rising national "strong state" identity with pointers that ultimately led to the "Hundred Years' War," illustrated with cases of



both direct and indirect housing policies of the interwar governments in Great Britain, Red Vienna, wider Europe, but also the USSR, Puerto Rico, Brazil, and Japan.

5 Part Two, the most comprehensive part of the book, follows Sauvy's geographical division (First, Second and Third Worlds) and structures the narrative of post-war mass housing drive chronologically, with the First World programmes preceding those of Second and Third Worlds. Glendinning states that the discourse and practice of organized modernity "was concentrated in the First and Second Worlds, which therefore inevitably and overwhelmingly dominate Part Two and, indeed, Mass Housing as a whole" (Glendinning, *Mass Housing*, p. 6). One can critique this geographic focus, especially given the growing literature on housing in Third World contexts, although the author counters this by differentiating Part Two into geopolitical subdivisions, for instance "American anti-socialism," "European Welfare states," different branches of socialism (Soviet, Yugoslav, Romanian, Albanian), and micro-regional specificities in sub-regions, such as the Low Countries, Nordic states, Poland, East Germany, etc. In addition, Glendinning defends the differentiation of Latin America, Africa and capitalist Eastern Asia (together part of his "Third World") from the First and Second Worlds by demonstrating that although these regions directed a significant mass housing output, as much as in the First and Second Worlds, their mass housing patterns cannot, according to him, be linked to the social-entitlement policies we see in the first two worlds. Latin America was for instance influenced by alternations of authoritarian and democratic regimes, while the Japanese government in turn stimulated state-directed development capitalism. In parts of post-colonial Africa an "aided self-help doctrine" was promoted by international development agencies as a more individualistic alternative to public rental housing.

6 Part Three reflects on the disintegration of centralized state socialism and the neoliberal turn, when mass housing became a "lightning rod for wider critiques of progress-led modernity" (Glendinning, *Mass Housing*, p. 7). Opposition against the top-down planned housing and the alienating sameness in the former First and Second Worlds became universal in the late 20th and early 21st century, even as the new Eastern Asian front in the Hundred Years' War heated up further. Glendinning discerns the emergence of a new tripartite system in the field of social housing. Firstly, there are mature mass housing systems (mostly in former First and Second Worlds) that use slimming-down demolitions to manage the organizational and architectural legacy of mass housing. The housing systems of the present-day "Global South" are considered a second housing system, where informal housing and international encouragement of aided self-help dominate the housing scene. Glendinning compares these housing systems to the aided self-help doctrines of their "Third World" predecessors, when international agencies promoted aided self-help in newly-independent former colonies as a more individualistic alternative to public rental housing, influenced by American anti-socialism ideologies. Finally, in Eastern Asia ultra-dense mass housing apartment blocks still rise in "strong states" such as in Singapore, South Korea, large cities in China, and Turkey. These housing blocks are heirs of capitalist development programmes, but without its utopian idealism. Planning and housing policies in these "strong states" are closely intertwined with developmental capitalism and strong nation-building strategies, however, their mass housing drives stemmed from different political and military confrontations of mid-twentieth-century Europe and America.

7 The book finishes with the question if this new state-led "progress" in housing is a symbol of a new dawn for mass housing, or another "great housing failure" in the making. Even if the benevolent state seems more of a myth than ever¹⁰, present-day society still struggles with unaffordable free-market housing, which puts "welfare state building without the welfare state" back on top of the agenda.¹¹

8 All three parts of the book illustrate what Glendinning defines as "multiple



modernities:” modern mass housing is not an expression of monochrome homogeneity but “a global landscape of riotously colourful variety and complexity, responding both to the diversity of the twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century state and to the countless permutations of modernist architecture” (Glendinning, *Mass Housing*, p. 1). *Mass Housing* is thus not a history of discourses, but emphasizes the local “facts on the ground” and reflects on massive, literally “concrete” built reality. The author uses a wide variety of images in the book to enable a comparable reading of the cases and illustrates the global reach and complexity of modern mass housing. By complementing historical development plans and diagrams of the housing schemes with photographs of the buildings in their present state, the author emphasises the concrete “visual” characteristics of housing, not only in terms of universal architectural ideals but also with regard to regional materials and construction methods.

9 There are some discrepancies in the scope and amount of detail of the different geographies in *Mass Housing*. The author based the scope of the publication on two main themes: modern state and modern architecture, which he discusses on a case-by-case basis. Housing programs that include both state agency and modernist architecture are prioritized, those involving neither are excluded, and those in between are dealt with more selectively. This hierarchal choice of projects highlights both state support and modernist high-rise apartment blocks leads to a limited treatment of privately-built mass housing, or mass housing in low-rise patterns.¹² As the author indicates himself, the book’s scope emphasizes breadth rather than depth and is mainly based on secondary literature, whose intrinsic variability led to significant asymmetries of coverage. As a result, cases dealing with Great Britain, New York City, the USSR, Korea, and the “Asian Tiger” states are worked out in a more precise manner than others, also influenced by the author’s previous work. Readers coming from a different background might notice the book’s reduced focus on private mass housing developers in some countries (although they have been described in depth in others, such as in South Korea¹³) or struggle with the more generalized and cursory treatment of colonial housing production legitimized by development policies in previous French, Belgian and Portuguese colonies in comparison to the precision applied by Glendinning to the British empirical context.¹⁴

10 Nonetheless, *Mass Housing* is undeniably the first and only comprehensive history on modern mass housing. The study unquestionably succeeds in its chief aim to “demonstrate the feasibility of a more connected-up alternative to the predominant ‘national silo-mentality’ within housing history” (Glendinning, *Mass Housing*, p. 550). Although the main part of the book is rooted in case-based research, it convincingly correlates both local and national specificity to continuous global narratives, and takes an exciting step in identifying “key transnational themes” answering the question why, and for whom mass housing was built in the first place. The author discerns how lofty social ideals of housing needs are deferential to political considerations during existential crisis of nation state, and how “greater the political urgency, the more wholehearted the engagement of organized state forces, the more quantitatively forceful might be the resulting housing drive” (Glendinning, *Mass Housing*, p. 551). Although mass housing is in essence a global phenomenon, international organizations and discourses were far less successful than national and regional initiatives. Mainly the “aided self-help” operations, well-financed by international institutions, had a significant global impact, although these were detrimental to mass housing as they mainly focused on low-rise and privately-built initiatives.

11 The analysis of the different types of modern states is one of the most refreshing features of the book, providing a valuable insight in various forms of welfare policies. Glendinning’s study of the evolution of the “strong” modern state that enabled housing, both directly and indirectly, is thus an insightful contribution to existing



scholarship in the field of political economy, such as Peter Marcuse's *Myth of the Benevolent State*.¹⁵ Overall, *Mass Housing: modern architecture and state power - a global history* challenges short-sighted notions of modern mass housing and opens ways for architectural historians in general, but also for scholars in construction history, sociology, urban studies, housing studies, finance, etc. to look at modern mass housing in a different light.

Notes

1 John R. GOLD, *The Practice of Modernism: Modern Architects and Urban Transformation, 1954-1972*, London: Taylor & Francis, 2007.

2 Annie FOURCAUT and Frédéric DUFAUX (eds.), *Le monde des grands ensembles*, Paris: Créaphis, 2004.

3 Florian URBAN, *Tower and Slab: Histories of Global Mass Housing*, Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2013.

4 Nicolas D. BLOOM, Fritz UMBACH, and Lawrence J. VALE, *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2015.

5 Miles GLENDINNING and Stefan MUTHESIUS, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for studies in British art by Yale University Press, 1994.

6 Stefan MUTHESIUS and Miles GLENDINNING, *Towers for the Welfare State : an Architectural History of British Multi-Storey Housing, 1945-1970*, Edinburgh: Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies, 2017.

7 Gaia CAMELLINO and Federico ZANFI (eds.), *Post-War Middle-Class Housing : Models, Construction and Change*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2015.

8 On the COST "Action Middle Class Mass Housing," see <https://mcmh.eu/>. More information on the non-European context can also be found in Ana Vaz MILHEIRO, Helena BOTELHO, José Luis SALDANHA and Juliana GUEDES, *Optimistic suburbia? Luanda - Lisboa - Macau*, Lisbon: ISCTE, 2015; and Leonor MATOS SILVA, Ana Vaz MILHEIRO and Inês LIMA RODRIGUES (eds.), "Optimistic Suburbia II: Middle-Class Mass Housing Complexes," in *Proceedings of the International Conference (Lisbon, ISCTE Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, 16-18 June 2021)*, special issue of *Cidades, Comunidades e territórios (CIDADES)*, 2022. URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/cidades/5104>. Accessed 4 August 2022.

9 Alfred SAUVY, "Trois mondes, une planète," *L'Observateur*, no. 118, 1952.

10 Peter MARCUSE, *The Myth of the Benevolent State: Towards a Theory of Housing*, New York, NY: Columbia University, Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, 1978 (Papers in Planning, 8). David J. MADDEN and Peter MARCUSE, *In Defense of Housing : the Politics of Crisis*, London: Verso, 2016.

11 Mark SWENARTON, Tom AVERMAETE and Dirk VAN DEN HEUVEL (eds.), *Architecture and the welfare state*, London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2015, p. 20.

12 The rising scholarship on the private bread-and-butter middle-class housing projects is considerable. To list a limited and subjective amount of them: on the Greek privately-built housing typologies, see Ioanna THEOCHAROPOULOU, *Builders, Housewives and the Construction of Modern Athens*, London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2017. On the practice of private mass-produced housing in India: Sarah MELSENS, Inge BERTELS, and Amit SRIVASTAVA, "The architectural production of India's everyday modernism: middle-class housing in Pune, 1960-1980," *ABE Journal*, no. 16, 2019. URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/abe/7011>. Accessed 3 August 2022. On the highly-influential private housing developers in twentieth-century Belgium, see Tom BROES and Michiel DEHAENE, "Real estate pioneers on the metropolitan frontier: the works of Jean-Florian Collin and François Amelinckx in Antwerp," *Cidades, Comunidades e territórios (CIDADES)*, special issue *Migração de regresso para Portugal*, no. 33, 2017, p. 89-112.

13 Glendinning's discussion of the South Korean 1970s "planned corporate development" is well-informed. The housing policies shifted from minimal state-built housing towards government-supported, but privately-constructed high rises by authorizing "apartment-zones" with a high plot ratio and no maximum height limit. The influence of these specific type of South-Korean enterprises-developers, with highly-developed, civil service-like internal bureaucratic structures, on the housing production was profound and discussed by the author in great depth in the book, p. 495-501.

14 Martina BARKER-CIGANIKOVA, Kirsten RÜTHER and Daniela WALDBURGER (eds.), *The Politics of Housing in (Post)Colonial Africa: Accommodating Workers and Urban Residents*,



Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter Oldenbourg; Cape Town: African Minds, 2020. Luce BEECKMANS, "The Development Syndrome: Post-War Housing and Residential Segregation in French Dakar (Senegal): Building and Contesting the SICAP Housing Schemes in the Late Colonial Period (1951-1960)," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2017. Richard HARRIS and P. J. LARKHAM (eds.), *Changing Suburbs: Foundation, Form and Function*, London: Routledge, 2016 [1999] (Studies in History, Planning, and the Environment).

¹⁵ Peter MARCUSE, *The Myth of the Benevolent State*, *op. cit.* (note 10).

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