

HOUSING RENEWAL AND MAINTENANCE IN EUROPE: TOWARDS A WORKING GROUP'S AGENDA

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Abstract

Developments in housing systems and markets have led to significant challenges to the management of the European housing stock. In Western Europe, reductions in public finance and revisions of the regulatory regimes have left social landlords with the task to formulate their own asset management strategies - strategies that have to provide viable ways for keeping their housing stock in line with housing needs. In Eastern Europe, the privatisation of public housing entails new management problems related to an ageing housing stock of relatively poor quality, often concentrated in estates with mixed (public and private) ownership. In order to address these problems, we are establishing a working group within the ENHR. In this paper we work out the objectives and approach of the working group in order to facilitate and explain its activities. The paper starts with a general overview of challenges towards social housing management in Western and Eastern Europe. From these general developments we distract themes that are interesting for international collaborative research within the research group. These themes are worked out into general research questions, approach and results. On the basis of these themes, we will invite researchers and practitioners to work on our projects.

1. Introduction

Management of the existing housing stock is becoming more and more a primary concern of European housing policy and practice. Since the annual production of new dwellings is only about 1% of the housing stock, changing housing needs will have to be met mainly by adequate management and transformation of the existing stock (e.g. Thomsen and Van

der Flier, 2002). Furthermore, developments in housing systems and markets have led to significant challenges to housing management. In Western Europe, reductions in public finance, revisions of the regulatory regimes and over-supply in some sub-markets have left social landlords with the task to formulate their own asset management strategies - strategies which have to provide (financially and socially) viable ways for keeping their housing stock in line with changing housing needs (Gruis and Nieboer, eds., 2004). In Eastern Europe, the massive privatisation of public housing entails new management problems related to an ageing housing stock of relatively poor quality, often concentrated in estates with mixed (public and private) ownership. There are questions concerning the division of responsibilities between public and private owners; adequate legislation to deal with this situation is lacking; the public managers are sometimes hampered by the (still) bureaucratic mechanisms within their organisations; the new owners are not used to being responsible for the maintenance of their dwellings and there are limited financial resources for maintenance and renewal among public and private owners. (e.g. Tsenkova, 2004). In order to address these problems, we are establishing a working group within the European Network for Housing Research. The main objective of the working group is to contribute to an exchange of experiences and creative, innovative solutions between European countries. The working group will focus on the above issues in relation to the maintenance and regeneration of the existing housing stock, and on processes and strategies at the level of estates/landlords in Western and Eastern Europe. In this paper we work out the objectives and approach of the working group in order to facilitate and explain the activities that will be carried out within it. The paper starts with a general overview of challenges towards the management of the social housing stock in Western and Eastern Europe. From these general developments we distract themes that are interesting for international collaborative research within the research group. These themes are worked out into general research questions, approach and results. On the basis of these themes, we will invite researchers and practitioners to work on our projects.

2. Social Rental Housing in Western Europe

In Western Europe, the continuous change in housing demand is one of the main challenges regarding housing renewal and maintenance. In the first decades after the Second World War, housing *quantity* was the main problem, but since then, attention has gradually shifted towards the *quality* of the housing stock. Due to demographic changes (e.g. smaller household size, ageing of the population) and economic growth, housing standards that were appropriate in the past have become obsolete. To illustrate the dynamics in the housing market: the present so-called 'restructuring' largely relates to relatively recent housing that has been built after the Second World War. The fact that the annual production of new dwellings is only about 1% of the housing stock, as has been mentioned above, enlarges the importance of a flexible housing stock. Already in the 1980s, several experiments were carried out to realise homes that could easily be adapted to changing demand. The moderate application of experiments with flexible building (flexible lay-out of dwellings etc.), however, indicate that creating a flexible housing stock is easier said than done.

For the coming decades, the ageing of the population will probably cause dramatic changes in housing demand. In addition, the general opinion on how housing for the elderly should be conceived has considerably been altered in the last twenty years: from old people's homes to independent dwellings with a variety of care arrangements.

Due to tendencies of government withdrawal, the responsibility for a housing supply that meets and will meet housing demand has shifted from the government to landlords or (other) private parties. In this context, the tenure mix of the housing stock is relevant. This mix considerably differs from country to country, as the examples in Table 1 show.

Table 1: Division of housing stock by tenure in various countries

	Social rented	Private rented	Owner-occupied
Austria (2002)	6%	24%	70%
Belgium-Flanders (2001)	5.5%	22%	72.5%
Denmark (1998)	20%	18%	58%
England (2002)	19%	10%	71%
France (1999)	20%	25%	55%
Germany (2002) ¹	14%	47%	39%
The Netherlands (2001)	35%	11%	53%

Source: Gruis and Nieboer, eds., 2004, p. 210; for Germany: GdW, 2004

In general, central government regulation of maintenance policies is limited (Gruis and Nieboer, eds., 2004). This also holds for the maintenance through social and public landlords. Besides national building regulations that contain minimum requirements for the quality of dwellings in general, there are few specific regulations. Nevertheless, rent regulations and government budget constraints can have a considerable impact on the level of maintenance that a landlord can afford. In Austria some municipal pre-war apartments still wait for basic improvements. In Belgium, many associations do not meet the requirement - imposed by the supervising umbrella organisation - that 10% of the rental income is reserved for maintenance and renovation. In England, the government has implemented the 'Decent Homes Standard', which contains minimum requirements for the quality of the dwelling stock. Local Authorities and housing associations are required to quantify the level of non-decent housing in their stock, develop an investment strategy to tackle this and to measure progress towards the elimination of non-decency in 2010. In April 2001 the government introduced a Major Repair Allowance for local authorities, which is a subsidy allowance paid by the government to represent the cost of maintaining the current condition of the stock.

Regulation for renewals consists mostly of targeted subsidisation and investment programmes. With the exception of the Netherlands, all countries mentioned in Table 2 directly support new building or maintenance in the social housing stock. Belgium has no subsidisation and investment programmes for social housing renewal. In some other countries the programmes are not specifically targeted at social housing (e.g. the Urban Renewal Investment Fund ("Investeringsfonds Stedelijke Vernieuwing") in the

¹ Percentage social rented sector includes public housing companies and co-operatives, but excludes social rented dwellings owned by private investors and private housing companies.

Netherlands). In Denmark, renewal is partly financed through the National Building Fund (“Landsbyggefonden”), which is filled by annual contributions from rental payments.

Table 2: Government funding of social landlords’ maintenance and renewal

Austria	Subsidies for new building and for maintenance
Belgium-Flanders	Subsidies for new building and renovation; loans must be approved by the umbrella organisation VHM
Denmark	Government funds in the 1990s for strengthening the position of the social sector; re-financing schemes, annual contributions of tenants through the National Building Fund
England	Local authorities: ‘single pot’ per region for housing investment; Housing associations: mixed capital and public funding, no government guarantee
France	Subsidies for new building and renovation, plus low-interest loans
Germany	Mixed public and private funding for new building; some subsidies for specific purposes, like energy saving measures, construction for the handicapped, and renewal or demolition of inferior pre-fabricated housing
The Netherlands	Guarantee structure; subsidies for local urban renewal programmes, no brick-and-mortar subsidies

Source: Gruis and Nieboer, eds., 2004

Our research in the countries mentioned above indicates that social landlords have an ‘operational’ approach towards their maintenance. Maintenance is either carried out on the basis of merely technical reasons and surveys or follows the complaints of costumers. In some cases, maintenance is restricted by the lack of financial resources. Renewals seem to be determined mostly by subsidisation and investment programmes, rather than by initiatives from the social landlords themselves. But there are notable exceptions. In the Netherlands, housing associations have begun to implement market-oriented or client-oriented maintenance policies, aiming to increase the diversity of their housing stock and tenants’ satisfaction. And in England, France and the Netherlands, some social landlords have taken on a leading role in the renewal of deprived neighbourhoods.

A matter of concern in large-scale renewal of the housing stock is the mixture of property rights. These rights may concern the land, the individual home or the building to which it belongs. A patchwork of property rights can be a serious hindrance in the process of urban renewal. In Western Europe, this is a classical rather than a new phenomenon, but nevertheless a problem that has been aggravated since the reduction of government support, for instance through the sale of rented housing to individual home-owners, and cuts in government budget for the purchase of private property.

In summary, we notice the following general challenges for housing renewal, maintenance and management in Western Europe:

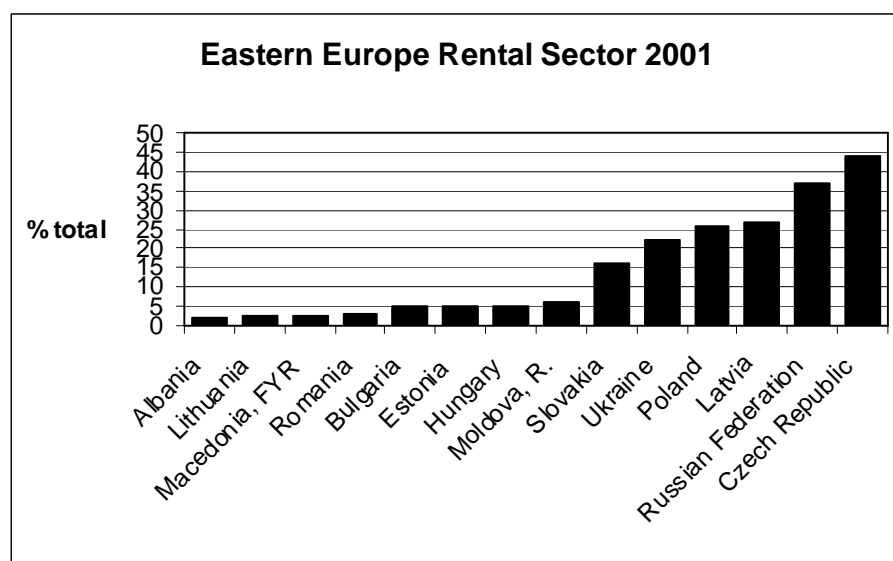
- a growing, continuous need for restructuring of the existing housing stock in order to meet changing demand;
- an increasing attention for the relationship between the characteristics (differentiation) of the housing stock and the social mix, liveability and market position of neighbourhoods;

- an increasing challenge to manage neighbourhoods and estates with mixed ownership due to privatisation and differentiation policies;
- the shifting of responsibilities from (central) government to landlords;
- resulting among others in the need for landlords to develop a more market or client-oriented approach towards the maintenance and renewal of their housing stock.

3. Public Rental Housing in Eastern Europe

In Eastern Europe the 1990s have marked a departure from a 'command system' of housing provision, with deregulation of housing markets and privatisation of public housing being the flagship of the reform process. Privatization of public housing has fuelled the expansion of home ownership, creating 'nations of homeowners' with levels of home ownership higher than 80 percent (Clapham *et al.*, 1996; Tsenkova, 2000). In the context of this shift away from direct state intervention to market-based provision of housing services, municipalities have emerged as the new social landlords with major responsibilities for housing the poor and disadvantaged. In recent years, East European countries have chosen different strategies to address major issues related to access, management and financing of social rented housing. While these strategies have not been explored in a systematic manner, there seems to be a consensus that the countries are moving in the same direction -- towards residualisation (Lux, 2003; Tsenkova, 2005). Recent research has argued that housing systems in the region will become more diverse in the future and the choices made with respect to social housing will be critical in defining the type of housing systems emerging in different countries and correspondingly the housing policy regime (Tsenkova and Turner, 2004).

Figure 1 Public Rental Housing in Eastern Europe in 2001



Source: Tsenkova and Turner, 2004

Figure 1 presents the share of public rental housing in the region. The distinction between social rental housing and public housing is particularly important, since in most countries the category of social housing does not exist or is in the process of being defined in housing legislation (e.g. Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine).² While mass privatisation, mostly through transfer to sitting tenants (free of charge, through vouchers or nominal fee), has reduced the size of the sector significantly, the differences are considerable. In fact, the developments in the social rented sector of Western Europe might prompt two diverging scenarios. In countries where the sector is small (e.g. Albania, Estonia, Hungary), it might be moving towards a residual model, operating as a 'command system', which targets low-income households. In countries where the sector is of considerable size (e.g. The Czech Republic, Russian Federation, Latvia), it might be expected to evolve as a 'social market', being the home of a mix of income groups.

Recent institutional reforms in the housing system across Eastern Europe, and the new financial regime for operation, have introduced more autonomy in the decision-making related to public housing at the local level. Municipalities have acquired autonomy in the management of public rental properties.³ This devolution in governance, essentially beneficial for locally appropriate responses to housing market conditions, has left a lot of unfunded mandates. Under the present regime of fiscal austerity, investment in maintenance and renovation of public housing and/or expansion of the stock is essentially driven by what municipalities can afford, as opposed to rational responses to housing need. Surveys in Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland, and Romania have indicated that most municipalities have financial difficulties and refrain from investment in new provision (Lux, 2003; Tsenkova, 2005).

Reforms in the legal framework in Bulgaria and Latvia provide the opportunity to set rents locally; while in Albania, Moldova, Serbia and Romania, rents are controlled at the state level. In most countries rents are set below market levels—5-10 percent of market rents—with 'flat' rent structures not reflecting the value or the location of the property.⁴ Rent arrears have become a wide spread phenomenon creating a lot of pressure for the administration and management of housing. Reportedly in the large cities in Romania rent arrears account for one third of rent revenues, in Bulgaria and Latvia this share is close to 20 percent (Lux, 2003; Tsenkova, 2004). There have been limited attempts to introduce income-tested housing allowances for low income households (e.g. Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia and Latvia). In most countries in Eastern Europe, rent reforms to ensure costs recovery for services have not been introduced. This policy of uniform rent constitutes a universal subsidy that is poorly targeted to households in need, particularly in the Czech Republic and Latvia where the sector is large with a social mix of tenants. Rent structures are not sensitive to demand and there is no mechanism for exit from the sector when the household's income increases above a certain threshold (Council of Europe Development Bank, 2004; Lux, 2003).

² In Estonia, Romania and Poland, the Housing Acts define housing for low income households as a subcategory of public housing.

³ In Romania municipalities are obliged to house people with income below the national average. Public housing is financed by the local budgets with some transfers from the state.

⁴ In Moldova, for example, rents are 0.2 lei per sq m per month, in Montenegro EUR 0.01, in Serbia 2.18-3.5 dinars (EUR 0.03-0.05) while in Romania rents are 25 percent of household income (10% in social housing).

Across the region direct housing subsidies from the state budget for new construction of public housing have been eliminated, although some funding for new social housing is provided in Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic. In some countries municipalities initiate their own pilot projects, often in partnership with international NGOs. Overall, support for the rental sector is limited to a handful of countries in the region listed in Table 3, while most of the housing programs are geared towards homeownership. It should be noted that war reconstruction efforts and assistance to refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and to some extent Serbia and Montenegro, have crowded out the ability of governments to address other housing policy areas.

Table 3: Government funding for public rental housing in Eastern Europe

Bulgaria	Central government subsidies to assist with payment of energy costs for low income households (energy allowance)
Czech Republic	State subsidized programs for maintenance and renovation of panel housing and energy saving retrofits; subsidised programs for new rental housing with tenant contributions – phased out; housing allowance funded by central government
Estonia	Central government subsidies for housing allowances with locally determined criteria for eligibility
Latvia	Local government subsidies to low-income households to assist with rent and utility payments; some pilot projects for renovation of multi-apartment buildings in selected municipalities
Macedonia	Local government subsidies for new construction of social rental housing plus government guarantees for Council of Europe Development Bank loan
Poland	Government subsidies provided to non-profit housing associations for new social rental housing; central and local government subsidies for housing allowances
Romania	Central and local government subsidies for the provision of new public rental housing; programs for renovation and energy saving measures in panel rental housing

Source: Lux, 2003 and Tsenkova, 2005

Maintenance practices in the public rental sector are in the process of fundamental adjustment. The process of change is driven by the escalating costs for housing services and the lack of systematic approach to the mobilization of funds for routine maintenance and capital improvements. Public landlords still employ lifecycle assessment where different elements need to be replaced in accordance with nationally set standards. While the technical requirements have moved towards harmonization with EU legislation, the major difference is that subsidies are no longer available and financial difficulties of tenants need to be taken into account. Within the general policy framework of local government control, the ‘day-to-day asset management’ appears to be the norm. It is characterized by a shrinking portfolio and efforts to balance the budget while avoiding major technical and social problems.

These relationships sketched in broad strokes reflect very general aspects of the role of the social rented sector, its character and asset management policies in different national housing systems. The previous analysis has highlighted that the sector in Eastern Europe faces a number of significant challenges:

- privatization policies have reduced the size of the public rental sector and continue to affect the portfolio of local governments (most countries do not have a moratorium on privatization);
- the devolution of power and responsibilities to local governments in the area of social housing has left a lot of unfunded mandates;
- public rental housing still operates like a 'command' system where ownership and management is vested with municipalities and pricing policies are not sensitive to demand or quality of housing services;
- withdrawal of supply based central government subsidies from the sector and limited support for demand-based housing assistance has created significant financial constraints;
- social housing landlords need to cope with financial, technical and social challenges in the context of growing housing costs and poverty in the region.

4. Towards the working group's agenda

From the developments in Western and Eastern Europe, we distract three central themes of international interest. These themes could make up the working group's research agenda for the forthcoming years. Below we discuss these themes and their central research questions. Also, we make some general suggestions for the research approach and results for each theme.

Theme 1: managing privatised housing

In both Western and Eastern European countries, social or public housing has been subject to privatisation policies. Particularly in Eastern Europe, large parts of the public housing stock have been sold. But, also in Western Europe social housing has been sold (e.g. in England, France and the Netherlands). As we have seen above, the management of the (partly) privatised estates poses various problems regarding property rights and the quality, organisation and finance of maintenance and renewal. Thus, the management of privatised housing is an important topic of international concern, which could benefit from an international exchange of knowledge. Therefore, our first suggestion for one of the central themes is to set up an international, cooperative research project, based on the following central questions:

- Which management problems occur in (partly) privatised estates in Eastern and Western European countries?
- What (innovative) approaches have been developed to deal with management in such estates?
- What differences and similarities can be found in problems and responses between Western and Eastern European countries?
- To what extent can policies and practices be transferred between countries?

The above questions could be addressed by a group of interested researchers in Eastern and Western European countries who are willing to write a paper on developments and practices in their country. These papers could be presented on the ENHR conference in 2006. On the basis of these papers, we could produce a book consisting of:

- a general introduction into to problems of managing privatised housing in Western and Eastern European countries (by the editors);
- a number of country monographs about country specific problems and responses, including at least one case study example for each country (by the contributing authors);
- a concluding comparative analyses of differences and similarities, a reflection on the transferability of practices as well as general recommendations for housing policy.

Theme 2: the changing role of technical housing management

Social landlords in Western European countries have to redefine the role of their technical management. Until recently, technical management consisted mainly of carrying out planned, operational activities on the one hand (day-to-day management of the housing stock), and carrying out subsidised renewal programmes of the (local) government on the other hand. As a result, technical management did not take much 'strategic' decision-making. Nowadays, as a result of reduced government finance and regulation and the increasing pressure to meet changing housing needs by adequate management of the existing stock, landlords are faced with the challenge to redefine their technical management. For example, landlords increasingly have to:

- relate their technical management to their overall strategic asset management and general market needs – this requires both a 'trickling down' of general strategic objectives into concrete, operational activities as well as the 'rolling up' of information about the quality of dwellings;
- look for financially sustainable strategies for renewal and maintenance of their housing stock with limited financial resources;
- be more responsible to individual client's preferences;
- take into account the environmental sustainability of their housing stock
- increase the effectiveness, efficiency and economy of maintenance, for example through outsourcing of maintenance and the use of performance contracts (e.g. Bougrain, 2002; Gibb, 2002; Straub, 2002; Boon and Sunikka, 2004; Gruis et al., 2004; Gruis and Nieboer, eds., 2004).

As a result, technical departments now have to concentrate not only on the activities to which they are used, but also have to fulfil new roles, for instance as internal advisers, creative thinkers, commercial developers and innovators (TNMG, 2004).

The changing role of technical management is the second theme that we suggest for international comparative research within our working group. Within this theme, we suggest to focus on the professionally managed social housing stock in Western European countries and possibly Australia, because the developments above are most prominent in these countries. The central research questions of this theme could be:

- Which challenges are posed to technical management by developments in housing, markets, policies and management?
- In what way do social landlords respond to these challenges within their technical management?

- What differences and similarities can be found between countries?
- To what extent can practices be transferred between countries?

The research could be based on a collaboration of researchers and practitioners. The result could be a book (and paper) about the changing role of technical management, including theoretical frameworks and innovative examples from the practice of (Dutch and English) social landlords.

Theme 3: housing management and social sustainability

Through the years, creating or conserving agreeable living conditions has always been a major concern in housing and housing research. This is not only true of the physical aspects of housing, but is also true of social aspects. In several European countries, the renewal of the housing stock is not only aimed to improve the technical quality, but also to improve aspects of 'liveability', such as anti-social behaviour and street/neighbourhood services, and what is called 'urban' sustainability, which contains not only ecological aspects, but also social and economic aspects, such as economic facilities, employment and social cohesion (Kearns and Turok, 2003, pp. 6-7).

With regard to the relationship between the built environment and liveability, two main approaches have to be mentioned. In the first approach the built environment is the main cause of inconvenient behaviour and therefore the main predictor for the degree of liveability in and the success of the neighbourhood. This vision is related to physical determinism and explains human behaviour by the physical-spatial characteristics of the built environment. Already in the first part of the 20th century this view was criticised for being a one-sided approach. Another approach was proposed, in which the emphasis was on social and cultural factors (see Gold, 1980, pp. 26-43, for a review). In this approach, the built environment was not seen as a cause of (bad) behaviour, but at most as a condition. Nevertheless, views that explain social processes through physical-spatial factors remain also in the last decades. For instance, a German investigation in 1978 (BMBau, 1978) found that implicit elements of physical determinism could still be found in several policy documents from that period: physical measures were expected to solve or at least to moderate social problems.

Nowadays, several European governments advocate housing diversification in low-income neighbourhoods as a means of combating deprivation and stimulating social security and 'liveability'. In their view, housing diversification leads to a social-economic mix of the population, and this, in turn, leads to an improvement of the liveability of the neighbourhood (see Figure 2). In this view, an indirect relation between physical characteristics and liveability is assumed.

Figure 2 Supposed relationships between physical housing characteristics and liveability



The first step, the relationship between physical housing characteristics and socio-economic characteristics of the inhabitants, has been confirmed in many studies: it is beyond doubt that the physical characteristics of a dwelling and its environment influence housing choice and, as a result, the characteristics of the population living in it. However, the second step, the relationship between (socio-economic) population characteristics and social sustainability, is questioned and subject to debate in literature (see Kleinhans, 2004, for a literature review). It can be argued that improvements of the built environment entail a removal of the original population, which takes its social problems to another area. So, it is crucial that housing renewal does not only lead to a geographical relocation of social problems, but also to an improvement of the liveability on a larger geographical scale. In this context, it is relevant whether a so-called ‘neighbourhood effect’ or ‘area effect’ exists: “the independent, separable effects on social and economic opportunities which arise from living in a particular neighbourhood” (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2002, p. 147). The results of research on this topic are fragmented and sometimes contradictory. As a consequence, the debate is still inconclusive, thus inviting to further research.

Due to diminished government support and government intervention, the role of individual landlords in housing renewal has grown. However, most studies about the effectiveness of housing renewal still concentrate on the role of the government, especially on government programs. The effectiveness of policies of landlords deserves more attention, including an appraisal of different policy instruments that a landlord can dispose of, like sale, price and allocation. Therefore, central research questions of this theme could be:

- What is the influence of characteristics of the built environment on liveability and urban sustainability?
- In what way and to what extent can housing management, maintenance and renewal influence the liveability and urban sustainability of neighbourhoods?
- What (innovative) approaches have been developed in practice to improve the liveability and urban sustainability through housing renewal and maintenance?
- What is the most effective option that landlords dispose of to reach policy objectives on liveability and urban sustainability?

The above questions could be addressed by a group of interested researchers in Eastern and Western European countries who are willing to write a paper on developments and

practices in their country. These papers could be presented at the ENHR conference in 2006.

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