



Delft University of Technology

Innovation and Tradition

van Gameren, Dick

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INNOVATION AND TRADITION

The idea that the development of twentieth-century modern architecture constitutes a linear and inevitable step in the evolution of the art of building has long since made way for a much more nuanced and layered perspective. The relationship between past and present is a complex one. Innovation can spring from a return to past practices, while clinging to an obsessive idea of the new can just as easily lead to stagnation. Looking back on the architecture of housing over the past 150 years, we can see a recurring orientation on forms from the past, albeit one that's informed by changing motivations and with different outcomes.

In recent years residential architecture has been awash with developments in which abstraction or imitation of familiar, traditional forms appears to be the new lingua franca in housing, spoken by designers with the reputation of innovator or traditionalist. However, the plethora of motives that, in the past century, have informed the renewed orientation on tradition appears to have been sharply reduced: from outspoken views on social reform and improvement of living conditions then, to just trying to keep up with social and political 'trends' today. The use of traditional forms is no longer a means with which to direct the ongoing process of innovation, but an end in itself. The Dutch writer P. F. Thomése put this into words in an essay in the *NRC Handelsblad*: tradition has lost its connotation of passing on methods of working and searching for continuity; it has become a lifestyle. He argues that history, with its embeddedness in time, is losing its meaning.

However, in this interpretation of tradition as a continuity of methods,

Dick van Gameren

improving and adapting over time previously built ideas, lies the fundamental key to housing design. When old forms are merely reproduced and innovation as an inextricable part of tradition is sidelined, then the architecture of housing is also losing its embeddedness and meaning.

This approach to design starting from tradition can literally be rooted in the past, or based on a contemporary starting point, developing this slowly in a tradition of itself.

Examples of the first approach of a strong connection to the past can be found in many works of the British Arts and Crafts architects around 1900. An important source of inspiration for them was the anonymous, traditional and seemingly timeless architecture of 300 years earlier, predating the industrial era. The way the Arts and Crafts architects made use of these sources varies greatly, from imitation, interpretation, abstraction or magnification to even caricaturisation.

The work of Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott (1864–1945) follows the historic examples quite closely, at least in a formal sense. However, aside from these familiar material and formal properties, he displayed in his projects a striking inventiveness in finding new typologies for the mass production of housing. Waterlow Court in Hampstead Garden Suburb in North London is a case in point. The building, one of the very first affordable (at least, at the time of construction) apartment buildings with shared facilities for single occupants, looks like a friendly sixteenth-century university college courtyard building. The architect saw his design as a first step towards an entirely new way of



Well Court in Edinburgh, designed by Sydney Mitchell & Wilson. Tradition and innovation brought together in a remarkable project for collective affordable housing.

living in a suburban setting, where collective housing blocks, for families as well as single people, would provide an alternative to what he thought were dreary suburbs with endless terraced housing. An even more radical example of this approach is his unbuilt design for an apartment building, published in 1906 in his book *Houses and Gardens*. He introduces an ideal plan for an urban apartment, clearly inspired by his designs for small country houses and cottages, in their turn based on traditional centuries-old models for these dwelling figures. The apartments have a typical layout, with inglenooks and a minimum of corridor spaces. The chosen layout with a three-sided orientation makes it necessary to liberate the apartment from the customary perimeter block, instead grouping two apartments around a central staircase as a freestanding small individual building. In his book, Baillie Scott explains his vision of these buildings, placed in a public garden, a park developed along natural lines, with woodlands and streams, thus compensating for the loss of a private domain outside the dwelling. The architect's vision is remarkably similar to the ideas brought forward 20 years later by the pioneering modernists such as Gropius and Le Corbusier.

Examples of the second approach, where architects start a 'new' tradition by carefully developing over time their ideas and designs for housing, can be found in the work of two Dutch architects, Willem van Tijen (1894–1974) and Jacob Bakema (1914–1981). They were both convinced 'modernists' with a strong interest in housing design, Van Tijen a member of CIAM since 1930, Bakema a leading figure of Team Ten in the post-war period.

Van Tijen explored in minute detail the optimal design for a small (*Existenzminimum*) apartment. Following

Gropius' ideal of the high-rise gallery-access apartment building, propagated by him in a series of designs but not yet realised, in 1934 Van Tijen designed and built in Rotterdam the Bergpolderflat, the first high-rise nine-storey apartment building with gallery access. The design was radical in many aspects; the steel structure, the use of prefabricated elements, the maximised transparency of both exterior and interior walls, all resulting in an extreme economy of space and material. In following projects, Van Tijen continued to develop this new standard, optimising the layout of the apartments and the quality of construction and detailing. The Zuidpleinflat, the first project Van Tijen could realise after the end of the Second World War in heavily bombed Rotterdam, shows the progress of this development. Minute adjustments in the unit plan are just one aspect of his patient search for the ideal standard. He also invited other architects to collaborate in the design. Gerrit Rietveld designed the big windows of the living rooms. Van Tijen's assistant and colleague at that time, Jacob Bakema, continued this search for an ideal standard in his own projects after he joined Johannes van den Broek in 1948, to form two years later the office of Van den Broek en Bakema, which would become one of the leading post-war Dutch practices, now mostly known for its Brutalist public and institutional buildings. In his housing designs, Bakema addressed the issues of monotony and lack of privacy as two of the disadvantages of the high-rise gallery-access. Building on Van Tijen's work and studies, Bakema introduced the idea of the split-level section with corridors giving access to apartments, combining the efficiency of a gallery-access system with the quality of free orientation in the dwelling units to both sides. In a long series of projects, this idea was developed, tested and improved. One of the first built results can be found in Berlin's

Hansa Viertel, as a striking and sculptural tower block with short internal corridors, ending in collective loggias.

The chosen split-level solutions made it easy to create within a simple continuous structure a strong mix of housing types and unit sizes. The building type thus developed formed an important part of Bakema's housing catalogue, developed over many years and illustrating Bakema's ideal of an 'open society' that allows for the 'individual's right to give personal expression to his philosophy of life'.

However, the pressure in the postwar period for mass production of housing led to the scale of his projects increasing, turning the small scale and size of the Berlin prototype into huge urban 'wall' structures, introducing again problems of anonymity and alienation.

This inspired the next generation of architects to rethink these models again and come up with new solutions.

The architects discussing their work in this publication are showing similar approaches to housing design, starting from a thorough understanding of tradition as a tool, as a method to embed their new architecture in time and context. They demonstrate clearly that housing design is not a stylistic exercise, nor an attempt for continuous invention of things not seen before. Something the projects have in common is that they carefully consider the existing, both as physical structures to connect to and as existing ideas and models for housing design, to reinterpret and further develop.

The carefully illustrated interventions and modifications in Studio KAP's contribution have a validity that goes beyond the individual projects described.

'It requires design insight into what needs to be reconsidered and replaced, and what is best left retained or conserved.' An approach that seems valid to housing design in general; looking for a careful balance between what is known and cared for, and what is new, necessary to answer today's needs.

cameronwebster architects show how a consistent exploration of architectural themes leads to seemingly quite different projects, still all based on the same design methods. In the projects, the search for ways to connect to climate and landscape and make very comfortable inside and outside spaces leads to a gradual development of a vocabulary of linked spaces, movement patterns and manipulated sections. Each project clearly builds on the experience of the previous one.

DO Architecture show in their project for Govanhill in South Glasgow that a critical and analytical reading of past projects, such as the famous Park Hill housing in Sheffield, embraced by Team Ten architects and Jacob Bakema when built, can lead to well-thought-out new interpretations of the 'street in the air'.

The careful reading by Gordon Murray Architects of the context of a new apartment building focuses on the almost-anonymous, modest vocabulary of the neighbouring 1950s local authority housing development in Edinburgh. It results in a surprisingly strong relation between the existing and the new, very expressive and carefully detailed project. The old and new benefit, creating a meaningful connection and a shared sense of place.

'Anatomy of a Terrace', the contribution of jmarchitects, shows how an understanding of the traditional types of the blackhouse and the terraced house

lead to a 'typology transfer', thus creating a new and beautiful domestic architecture, not merely based on an abstraction of vernacular, but looking into possibilities of space, light and connection to the surrounding landscape and cityscape.

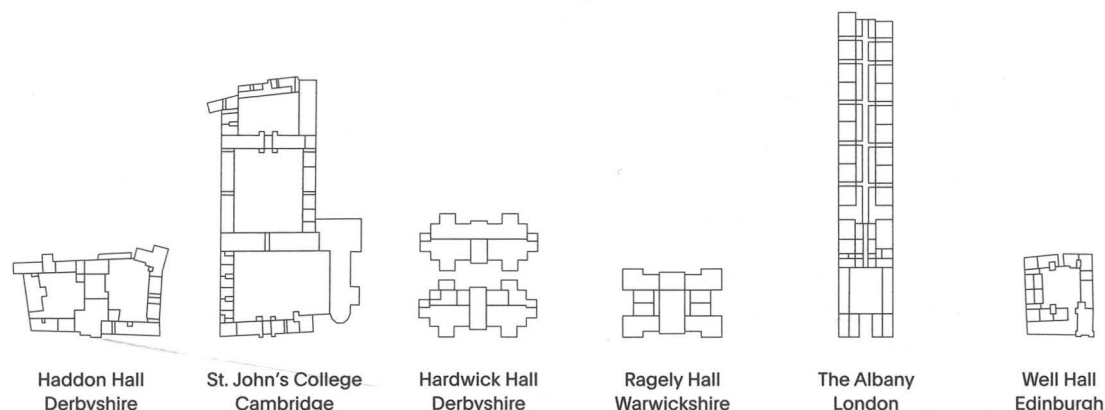
Elder & Cannon refer to their projects as the Palazzo and the Keep, again an obvious reference to traditional typologies, both local and international, as starting points for their design. They are not direct visual imitations, but reinterpretations of the specific spatial and material qualities of these types, leading to projects firmly anchored in their sites. It is striking how, within the restrictions of contemporary housing design, the idea of the solid wall being at the same time a space in between, so fantastically explored in the austere, introverted medieval Scottish keeps, is reinvented in the Laurieston project.

An exceptional project is Orkidstudio's Hellen's House, designed and built in a very different context, that of rural Kenya. An inventive use of locally produced and available building materials results in an affordable and beautiful private house. The built project will hopefully become an example for others building their homes, showing a very affordable way to achieve a much higher quality of construction than is common practice at this moment. The introduction of this new type, which looks like it has always been there, rooted in context and everyday life, will hopefully start a new tradition, a new vernacular.

In all examples, the orientation on an architecture shaped by local customs and traditions, comes to the fore as a means to innovation. In this connection of tradition and innovation lies the power of the architecture of housing; it acknowledges the need for domestic spaces that can be recognised as such

and be appropriated, spaces rooted in time, answering the desire for a private, constant place in a surrounding world that seems to change faster and faster; the desire for a sense of place.

A GENEALOGY OF COLLECTIVE LIVING IN BRITAIN



Courtyard

Central Hall

1400

1500

1600

1680

1770

1890



Haddon Hall
great hall



St. John's College
great hall



Hardwick Hall
long gallery



Ragely Hall
great hall



The Albany
outdoor gallery

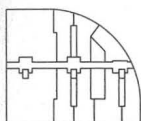


Well Hall
club room and
apartments facing
the terrace

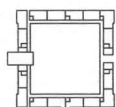


Vitruvius Britannicus,
Colin Campbell,
1715-1725

A genealogy of collective living in Britain,
compiled by Dick van Gameren for the RIBA exhibition
At Home in Britain, 2016.



Albert Court
London



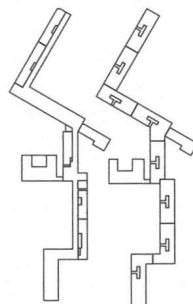
Waterlow Court
London



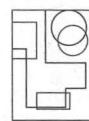
Highpoint II
London



Keeling House
London



Cripps Building St.
Johns College
Cambridge



Mecanoo Mansion
London

1900



Albert Court
entrance hall

1910



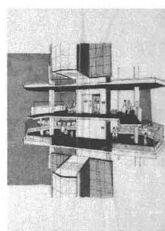
Waterlow Court
dining room

1930



Highpoint II
entrance hall

1950



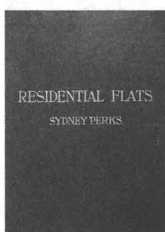
Keeling House
balcony areas
(drawing)

1970

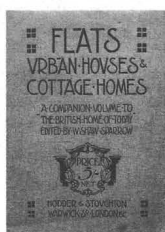


Cripps Building
roof terrace

2016



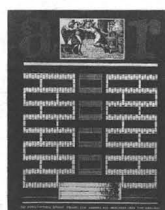
Residential Flats,
Sydney Perks,
1905



Flats, Urban Houses and
Cottage Homes,
W. Shaw Sparrow,
1906



The Modern Flat,
Yorke and Gibberd,
1937



Architectural Review
#695, 1954