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## 29

# URBANISM, HOUSING, AND THE CITY

*Cor Wagenaar*

Housing shapes, or at least envelops, people's private lives. Urbanism, in contrast, intervenes in the public domain. Why, then, include a chapter about housing in book on urban planning? Because even though housing embodies the private realm, it also thoroughly affects the public domain. If the housing conditions of the poor lead to epidemic diseases, for instance, these will affect the entire urban population. Moreover, poor health decreases people's production capacities and weakens a nation's military strength, as governments found out in the 17th century. Since the poor normally are the vast majority of the urban population, their housing situation has a major effect on the structure of cities. Mass housing is a financial challenge: providing decent homes for the millions requires monumental investments. Yet these investments may stimulate the entire economy. Whereas the poor usually have little choice where to live, the wealthy can monopolize the most attractive sites in or near cities; the distinction between villa parks and poor neighborhoods obviously leaves a mark on the layout of cities. But how does urban planning affect housing? And on what grounds do urban planners justify these interventions in the private realm? What explains why urbanists managed to tamper with something as sacrosanct as the ownership titles of land?

The answer is that urbanism developed as an instrument to address very serious crises. These threatened public life, and coping with them was a public task. Using examples primarily from the Netherlands, this chapter explores how housing became one of urbanism's major issues. Since the essence of urbanism is the spatial distribution of human activities, it focuses on the development of spatial models, their application, and some of their consequences. Concentrating on these aspects, it obviously covers only a fragment of a topic that is so vast it could easily fill this entire handbook—many aspects, however important, had to be discarded. Comparative research of the type carried out by Maartje Martens and Anne Power, who studied the way housing markets function, could not be dealt with here (Martens 1991; Wassenberg 2013). Likewise, the impact of housing on racial segregation—and the other way around—could not be included (Vale 2013). We only briefly touch upon the evolution of housing typologies, a topic dealt with by Florian Urban and Wolfgang Sonne (Urban 2012; Sonne 2016). We could not go into the difficulties that inevitably manifest themselves when urbanism confronts “bottom-up” development. Even so, we are confident that the models presented here, from a country that occasionally contributed original solutions and often successfully copied strategies from abroad, gives a fairly complete overview of the issues at stake. The chapter concludes by pointing out the virtual abolition of planning and discontent with its major legacy: the immense numbers of dwellings in suburban housing estates built after World War II. It discusses

how these changes shaped new realities, with fundamental consequences for the relation between urbanism and housing.

Apart from hygienic disasters, dangers were inherent in unplanned, chaotic urban growth. These crises have given public authorities, national and municipal governments, the power, unheard of since the mid-19th century, to intervene in people's private property and life. In most countries, until the late 1930s, counteracting the "natural" forces of the free market was a monopoly that urbanism shared with the military (the major exception, obviously, was the Soviet Union, which embraced economic planning almost from the day it came into being). Here we find the origin of an immense expansion of power hardly conceivable today: in the mid-20th century, urbanists planned the forced resettlement of entire regions, pointed out complete neighborhoods for demolition, cut highways (with the assistance of traffic engineers) through densely built up inner cities, and decided to invade the rural countryside with new housing estates. Few other disciplines can claim to have gone this far.

### **"Natural" Tendencies: Dispersal of the Well-To-Do, Concentration of the Urban Poor**

In the late 19th century, urbanists singled out two housing-related phenomena they needed to come to terms with: the trend for the rich and wealthy to leave the cities and move to the countryside, and the catastrophic living conditions of the urban proletariat. Often credited for being the first handbook on urban planning, Reinhard Baumeister's *Stadt-Erweiterungen in technischer, baupolizeilicher und wirtschaftlicher Beziehung* also addresses these issues (Baumeister 1876, 12–32).

In preindustrial times, the elite had already shown a marked preference for living in the countryside, the principal reason being the wish to escape the unhealthy climate and lifestyles in most cities. The stench of Amsterdam, for instance, was obnoxious: people could smell it several kilometers outside the city's borders. Those who could afford it, the upper classes and the well-to-do bourgeoisie, built country estates surrounded by impressive gardens in an Arcadian, rural landscape (Wagenaar 2015). What was well-known from firsthand experience was scientifically proved in the late 18th century: people living in the countryside had a life expectancy almost twice as long as people living in cities. Apart from being healthy and idyllic, life in the countryside was also acclaimed for its moral virtue. Not only did it provide direct contact with a natural order deemed divine, it also allowed the owners to escape from the temptations of the city. Even in a Calvinist country like the Netherlands, cities were the scene of endless drinking parties and copious meals that struck foreigners as extravagant. It took the rationalization and regimentation that came with the modernization of economic life in the middle of the 19th century to wipe out this side of life. Even in countries where industrialization was notoriously slow, like the Netherlands, this marked a profound change that provided Johan Huizinga, the renowned Dutch historian, with the topic for his much acclaimed *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1938).

Over the course of the 18th century, the trend to found country estates for individual families and their personnel broke off. Gradually a new type of outplaced urban settlements in the countryside developed: colonies for the upper middle classes. These had precursors—the royal crescent in Bath can be seen as an example—and there are even 18th-century experiments with rural colonies for the working classes (well-known are utopian models like Fourier's Phalanstères) (Pérusson 1843). Now their number rapidly increased, especially in the United States, where garden suburbs became immensely popular (Stern 2013) (Figure 29.1). A more modest variant was the villa colonies that appeared in the outskirts of cities, and the park-like expansions on former fortifications that can be found in many Dutch and German cities, can be seen as a linear variation on this theme. Inspired by his stay in the United States, Ebenezer Howard introduced yet another model: his Garden Cities were meant to accommodate all social classes, and to include industries, offices, and cultural

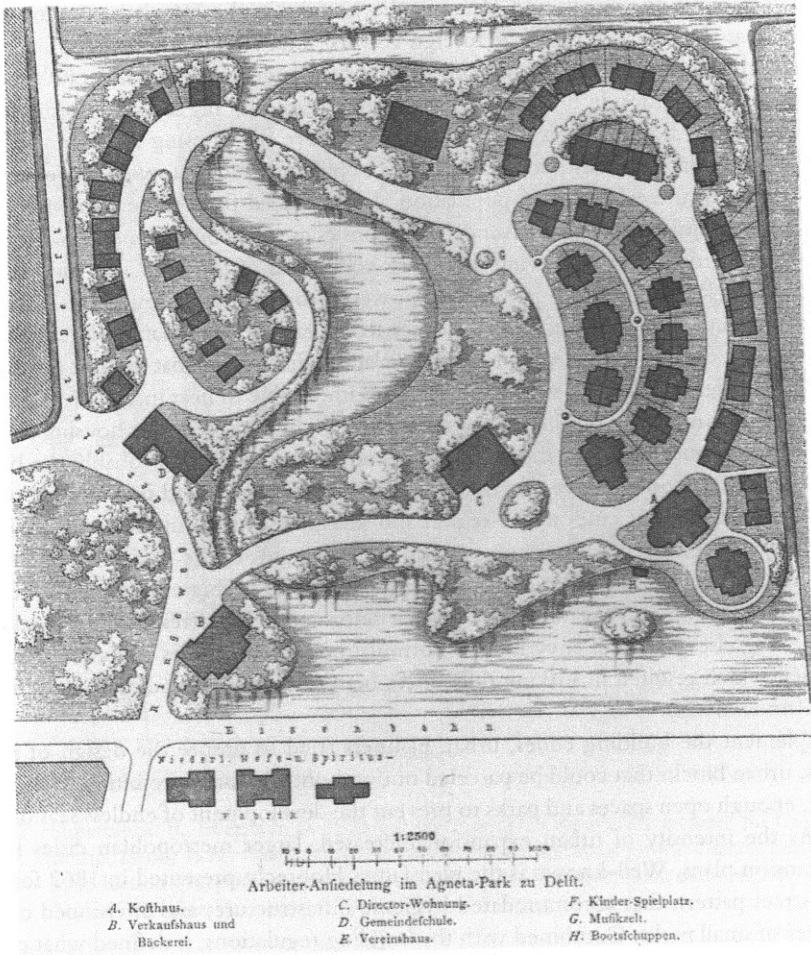


Figure 29.1 Agneta Park, Delft. Completed in 1884 to the design of E.H. Gugel and F.M.O. Kerkhoff, who were responsible for the houses, and L.P. Zocher who was responsible for the park, this garden suburb was an initiative of Jacques van Marken who wanted to provide the working people of his factories with decent living conditions.

Source: personal archive, Cor Wagenaar.

facilities as well as housing. Private land ownership was to be abolished; the excessive profits developers squeezed out of their properties would be a thing of the past. Convinced that the Garden Cities were bound to be a huge success, Howard firmly believed that they would usher in the end of traditional cities with their hygiene problems and social tensions—a view that explains the subtitle of his bestselling handbook *To-Morrow. A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*.

Real reform was desperately needed for the urban poor. In his *Stadt-Erweiterungen in technischer baupolizeilicher und wirtschaftlicher Beziehung*, Reinhard Baumeister (1876, 16–17) commented on the tremendous loss of life—and, therefore, working power—caused by the disastrous living conditions of urban paupers. As medical cartographers had pointed out in the 18th century, the urban poor usually inhabited the least salubrious parts of cities. Stinking, dirty air was generally seen as the origin of epidemic diseases. Scientists argued about the exact substance that produced so much misery, but few doubted that the quality of the soil, its humidity (partly a consequence of the level of the groundwater), and polluted ponds, ditches, and canals caused most of the problems. In the

Netherlands, scrubbing the streets and cleaning the houses (in the Dutch frenzy for immaculate environments that never ceased to amaze foreign visitors) didn't help (Knoop 1763). A major contribution to solving the problem was the construction of sewage systems. Bazalgette's monumental sanitation project for London in the 1860s alleviated the infamous "big stink," inspiring many cities to follow suit (Ackroyd 2000). This first strategy to improve the housing conditions of the urban poor targeted the urban areas they occupied. But since epidemics rarely stopped at the borders of the poor neighborhoods, the entire urban population also benefited from these immensely expensive operations, which required the most advanced solutions engineers could come up with.

The next battleground for improving the living conditions of the poor was the housing stock itself. Building regulations proved a particularly powerful tool. Enforced by the so-called building police, they prevented the construction of houses that were shoddy, that easily caught fire, that had ceilings so low that the rooms were believed to lack sufficient air, that did not provide enough daylight, that were leaking, or that were difficult if not impossible to heat in winter. Although these regulations implied limitations on the private investors who built most of the housing stock, similar building codes were introduced in most European and American cities. Probably the best known and surely one of the most effective was the one of Berlin; first published in 1853 and modified in 1872, it was copied by most cities in the region and several elsewhere in Germany (Eberstadt and Möhring 1910). It prescribed a minimum size for the courtyards of the Berlin tenement buildings that were soon dubbed "Mietskasernen" (the courtyards should be big enough for a horse-drawn fire car to make a turn), and the distance between floor and ceiling (resulting in spacious rooms that people living elsewhere still envy today). Formulating building codes was a prerogative of the municipalities, which resulted in striking differences between housing typologies in different cities (Geist and Kürvers 1984).

To complement the building codes, urban planners tried to ensure the design of sufficiently wide streets, urban blocks that could be parceled out without necessarily resulting in shallow plots, and, ideally, enough open spaces and parks to prevent the development of endless seas of tenement buildings. As the intensity of urban expansion increased, larger metropolitan cities introduced general expansion plans. Well-known is the plan James Hobrecht presented in 1862 for Berlin. It provided a street pattern that accommodated hygienic infrastructure, and envisioned open spaces and a number of small parks. Combined with the building regulations, it defined what can be seen as the city's genetic code; similar combinations of building regulations and urban plans determined the character of rapidly expanding metropolitan cities such as Barcelona, Budapest, Hamburg, Vienna, and many others. They also determined the living conditions of the vast majority of the inhabitants of these cities.

Following the example of Great Britain, many countries started adopting forms of subsidized social housing in the 1890s; the Dutch Public Housing Law of 1901 attracted international attention. The main body of the law provided the organizational and financial arrangements for public housing; it also included a paragraph that required the larger Dutch cities to introduce general expansion plans, forging very close ties between public housing and urbanism that were only severed in the last decades of the 20th century.

### **Housing and the City as a Work of Art**

Combating concrete problems that threatened the well-being of the community gave a strong impetus to urbanism. There was, however, another motive, quite strong until it was radically abolished in the course of the 1940s: the ambition to make cities into works of art at a grand scale. Originally, urbanism developed as an extension of the architect's work, approaching cities as buildings of a very large scale. Dividing the city into functional zones and defining a traffic structure to connect them, urbanists created the city as a three-dimensional construct. A designer's vocabulary evolved

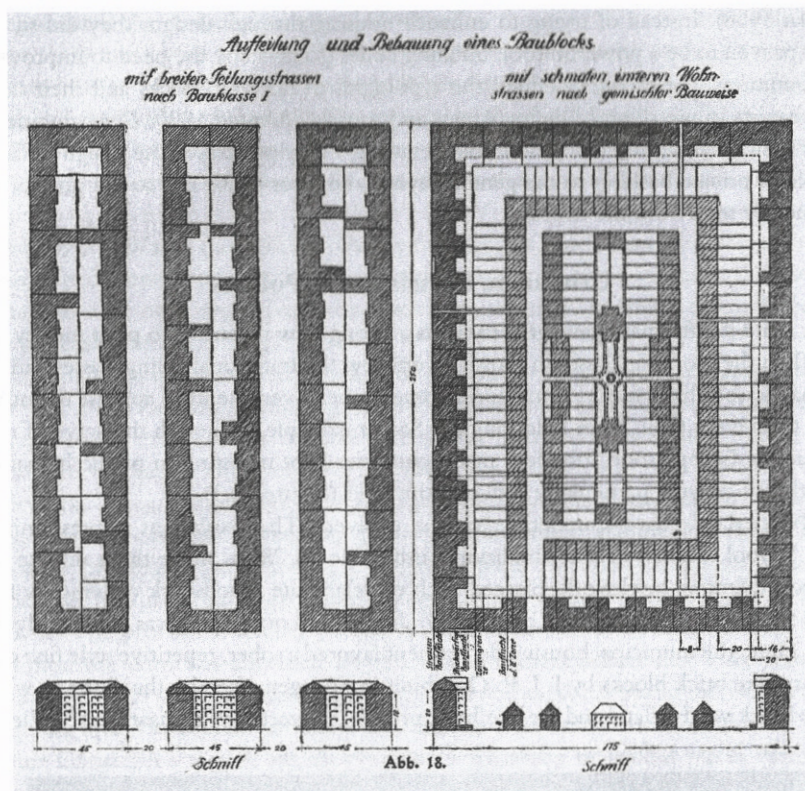


Figure 29.2 Superblock. R. Eberstadt, B. Möhring, R. Petersen, Offener Wettbewerb für Gross-Berlin, Berlin 1910. One of the principles of the competition for the Greater Berlin was the introduction of a parceling structure that anticipates the superblock and broke away from the “cult of the street.”

Source: Eberstadt 1910.

that conceptualized the design of the public domain, its streets, squares, parks, and alleys, and the open spaces between buildings. Urban beauty should foster feelings of civic pride and express the basic values of the urban community. The seminal town planning exhibitions of Berlin (1910) and Düsseldorf (1912) underline this aspect (Hegemann 1911) (Figure 29.2). Promoting strategies to control the aesthetic quality of cities, and calling for the conservation of the urban beauty from earlier epochs, the organizers wanted to regain what allegedly had been lost—looking backward was as much part of their aspirations as paving the way for the future.

What was needed to actually realize the spatial qualities of streets and squares was to frame them with buildings. Designing these, however, is rarely the urbanist's task. Since urbanism is essentially a public activity, the closest link is with public buildings: schools, bathing houses, police stations, theaters, concert halls, opera buildings, town halls, sometimes churches. The earliest handbooks (Baumeister 1876; Sitte 1889; Stübgen 1890) deal extensively with the best ways to position them in the urban landscape. Most authors preferred to endow major streets and squares with only one representative building, believing that distributing them over a larger area maximized their aesthetic effect. Supplemented with luxurious villas for the urban elite, these assignments made up most of an architect's portfolio. This did not mean that urbanists discarded mass housing. Quite the contrary: they saw it as the main substance of the city. In the words of A. E. Brinckmann: “Building cities means using housing to shape space” (“*Städte bauen heißt: mit dem Hausmaterial Raum gestalten*”)

(Brinckmann 1908). Instead of trying to enhance housing through design, they did so with what had already proven to be a powerful tool: building codes. Justified by the need to improve the city's hygienic conditions, these codes defined the typologies of housing blocks and their "envelope," allowing urbanists to use them to define streets and squares. Around 1900, German cities began to experiment with what became known as "Bauberatung": they prescribed the design of facades, limiting the role of private builders to the general layout and floor plans, and to the sides of a building that could not be seen from the street.

### Urbanism, Housing, and Politics

World War I and its aftermath gave governments a strong new incentive to pour money into social housing. When the working classes in Russia overthrew the traditional ruling classes and embarked upon the road to socialism, fear of a similar outcome drove governments to appease the masses of the urban poor to prevent them from following the Soviet example. Although the wave of revolutions that swept across Europe soon subsided, many countries kept investing in public housing. Austria and the Netherlands were particularly active in this field (Figure 29.3).

In the Netherlands, two competing visions evolved. The exuberant expressionism of the Amsterdam School resulted in fairly traditional urban blocks. What made them unique was heavily decorated, sculptural brickwork, pierced with the elaborate woodwork of window frames and doors at the facades facing the streets (Bock 1983). Its plainer counterpart was particularly popular in Rotterdam. Here, the municipal housing department favored a sober, repetitive style first epitomized by the factory-like brick blocks by J. J. P. Oud built in Spangen, then by the abstract, white settlements of the Hoek van Holland and the Kiefhoek projects (Taverne, Wagenaar, and de Vletter 2001).

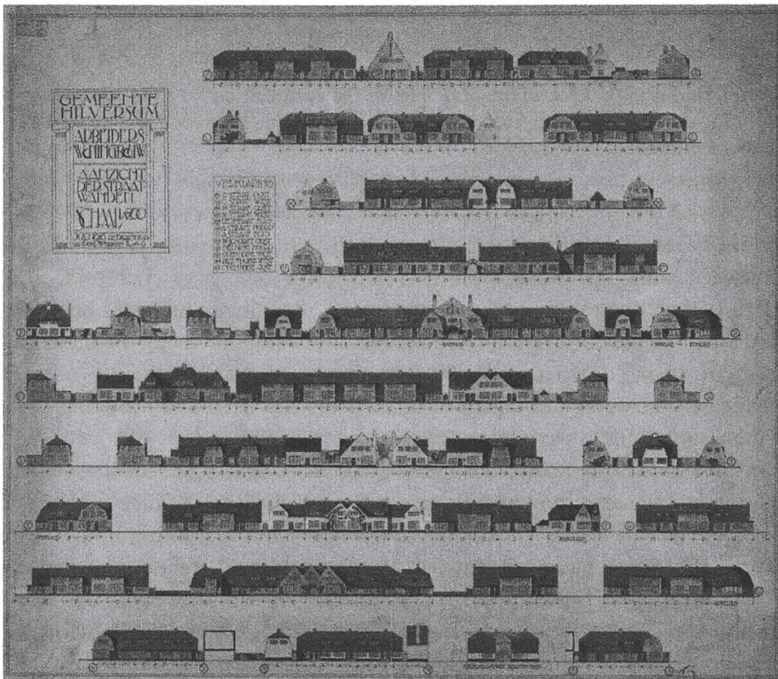


Figure 29.3 Project for working-class housing in Hilversum, 1916. W. M. Dudok used housing as a tool for urban aesthetics, a strategy made possible by the Public Housing Law of 1901.

Source: personal archive, Cor Wagenaar.



The latter represented the design ideology of Modernism, the style allegedly driven by the ambition to mark a sharp break with the past. By far the largest housing estates of this type were built in Germany: Ernst May's "Neue Frankfurt," and in Berlin Siemenstadt; Bruno Taut's colorful Onkel Tom's Hütte; and the much acclaimed Hufeisensiedlung (Huse and Jaeggi 1987).

Around 1925, the Dutch government reduced its investment in public housing, and in the early 1930s it stopped almost completely. In Austria, on the other hand, the famous settlements that won its capital the name of "das rote Wien" (red Vienna) were part of a policy that lasted until the eve of World War II (Jahn 2014). Unlike their Dutch and German counterparts, Austrian architects developed a new typology that combined the spacious green spaces of the garden cities with the amenities that only large-scale urban blocks could offer. In them, the architectural and urban scales perfectly merge.

In the totalitarian empires that emerged after World War I—first the Soviet Union, then fascist Italy, and in 1933 Nazi Germany—housing was subordinated to the ideological goals of the state. Urban plans had barely exceeded the city's borders in the 19th and early 20th centuries; now they reorganized and reconstructed entire regions, nations, and eventually even the European continent, with new networks of roads, highways, railways, and waterways. Planners essentially proposed new economic systems, for example connecting places rich in natural resources with faraway places where they were processed, thus creating mutually dependent, mono-functional regions. States transferred people from overpopulated, usually industrialized areas to distant farms or mines that needed workers. The process of settling people in these lands was often referred to as "colonization"; sometimes, the term was also used for the new IJsselmeerpolders that were created in the Netherlands in the 1930s to fill in parts of a wide branch of the North Sea in the very center of the country. Defining actual settlement patterns was a task for urban planners. In rural areas, they often applied Walter Christaller's model, which proposed a hierarchy of central places surrounded by villages at a fixed distance; the same system was used in the Noord-Oostpolder in the Netherlands.

### **Housing as a Battlefield in the Cold War**

With the exception of the Soviet Union and its expanded empire, the outcome of World War II frustrated the realization of these far-fetched visions. Urgent problems had to be tackled. Cities needed to be rebuilt, their destruction a consequence of one of the war's most devastating characteristics: the decision by all parties involved (except the occupied nations) to target the civilian population, an easy goal thanks to the increasing efficiency of air raids (Düwel and Gutschow 2013). Far more urgent, however, was the resettlement of millions of refugees, partly a consequence of another novelty of the war: the forced expulsion of all original inhabitants of all regions that were transferred from one state to another, the outcome of the redrawing of the political map of Europe. One of the new borders became especially consequential during the Cold War: the so-called "iron curtain" between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean that divided the continent in 1948. The Soviet Union forcibly integrated the countries to the east of it—East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and for a short time Yugoslavia—into its economic and political system.

One consequence was the disappearance of public housing as a separate category. Since, in principle, everything was state-owned or at least state-controlled, the entire housing stock became public. Underlining their official status as the new political elite, the Soviets for a time provided workers and farmers with palatial buildings that combined the repetitive qualities of mass housing with the luxury of housing for the ruling classes. After Stalin's death this style was quickly abandoned and replaced by industrially produced buildings (Wagenaar and Dings 2004).

If the Cold War was a battle of lifestyles and if the main issue was which of the two systems was most effective in improving the living conditions of the lower classes, housing obviously played a fundamental role (Wagenaar 2015). Socialist realism for a short time favored traditional architectural

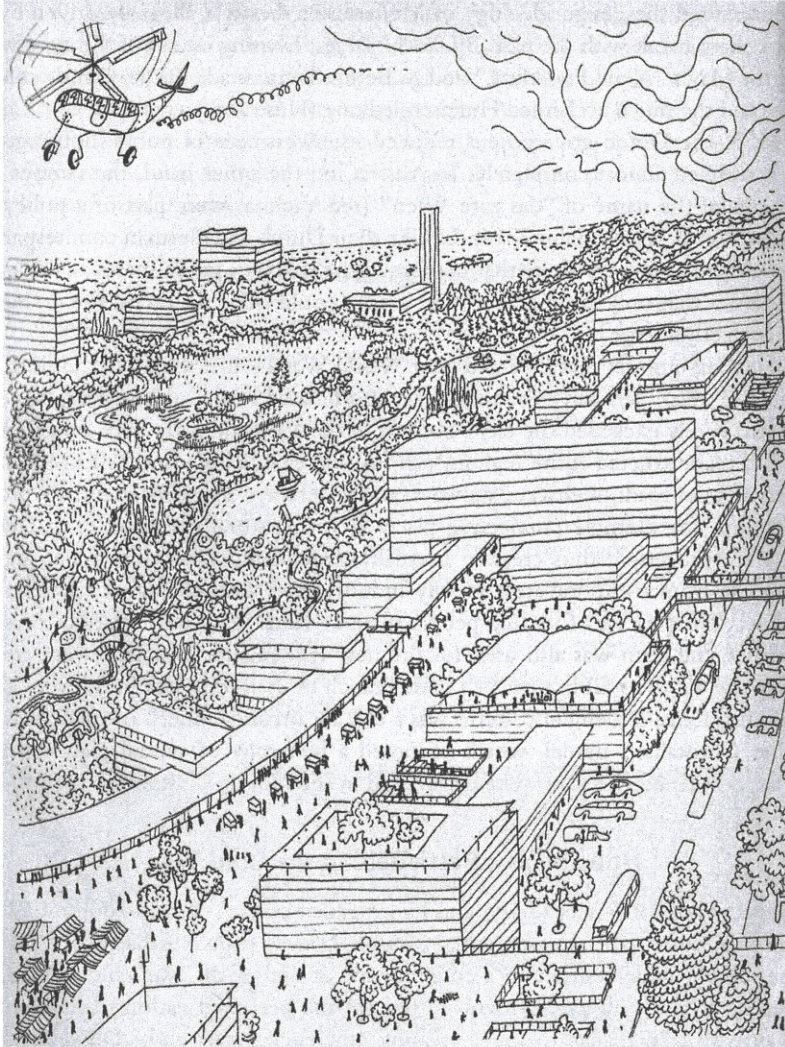


Figure 29.4 The Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin, 1957. Located in West Berlin, a capitalist island in the middle of socialist East Berlin, this exhibition was intended to be a demonstration of the “Western” way of life, as opposed to the socialist-realist Stalinallee (now Frankfurter Allee and Karl Marx Allee) in East Berlin. Four years before the erection of the Berlin Wall, the exhibition attracted many visitors from East Berlin.

Source: Interbau GmbH, Die Stadt von Morgen. Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin, Berlin 1957.

and urban strategies for their representative potential, preferring compact cities with monumental squares lined with lavishly decorated palaces for the working classes; the Western countries almost immediately adopted low-density, cellular models that ushered in suburban sprawl (Figure 29.4). Dutch urbanists organized new housing estates according to hierarchical principles that would ideally result in a sequence of scale levels, claiming that the resulting spatial structures would promote parallel social structures that enhanced a sense of community—a way of thinking that can also be found in other countries. Located in the green, rural countryside (echoing the principles of the Garden City), these neighborhoods were believed to be healthy. Public housing dominated them; in the Netherlands overall the percentage of private housing could be as low as 20%. Since mass housing

implies repetition and the development of standard typologies, these principles appeared to be ideally suited for modern approaches to architecture, though it took some 10 years before Modernism became the norm. Repetition and standardization became the norm straight away, but contrary to what “official” historiography has to say, most architects stuck to “traditional” idioms. (See, for instance, *Stad voor het leven*: this is even true for Rotterdam.) Apart from the principle dilemmas—some critics refused to see housing as a distinct problem and argued that the only proper way to improve people’s living conditions was to fight for higher wages—social housing systems also tended to isolate housing for the poor from housing for the other social classes. This resulted in class separation by urban area instead of segregation in smaller-scale districts, as had been normal in most cities. Starting as a financial support mechanism to accommodate the working classes, public housing began to have an impact on the social geography of cities; the consequences, sometimes dramatic, only began to manifest themselves in the 1960s.

During the Cold War, a new form of Modernism evolved as a response to socialist realism. Recent studies show that it was specifically created to represent a type of society that cultivated the virtues of leisure and consumption rather than those of hard work to fulfill the promises of communism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it originated in the United States. Sports facilities, shops, offices, private villas, cultural institutions, and everything related to the car adopted this so-called International Style. Although it heralded private consumerism, it had a political mission no less collectivist than its socialist counterpart: rapidly expanding social security networks to guarantee that the miracles of the unfolding consumer society were within reach of all social classes. Representing the Welfare State, the International Style underlined the alleged moral and technological superiority of Western countries. Very few authors dared to question the ideology of the International Style; in all likelihood, they were reluctant to denounce the political principles it professed to represent.

### Inner City Decline, Suburban Sprawl

Probably the most dramatic spatial revolution was a consequence of the growth of private car ownership. The car opened up the countryside and promoted suburban expansion; living in suburbia, in turn, made it almost imperative to buy a car. Although most Western countries saw their populations grow at an astonishing pace, the larger cities lost inhabitants to smaller suburban settlements. Amsterdam, for instance, shrunk by almost 300,000 people to about 700,000. As the car became the main vehicle communicating between practically all functions of modern life, shopkeepers in the inner cities felt the need to compete with the facilities in the new, car-friendly neighborhoods in the countryside. Representing the interests of the shopkeepers and usually supported by the chambers of commerce, municipal politicians pushed large-scale inner city reconstruction projects that cut traffic arteries through densely built-up historical urban tissue. This process soon triggered protest from conservationists and citizens alike, but nevertheless caused monumental damage in many European cities.

○ The consequences of this policy were almost negligible, however, compared to what was going on in the United States. There, it had started much earlier, alarming European urbanists who toured the country in the 1930s. In the 1950s, it confronted American cities with an unprecedented urban crisis. Whereas in the first years after the war American urbanists had been convinced of the benefits of their ways of doing things, which they helped to spread to Europe, now they became interested in European alternatives to their rigorous zoning schemes. In the late 1950s, some of them imported multi-use policies and a preference for pedestrian streets—still relatively scarce in Europe—to the United States (Wakeman 2014). The book that summarized and expanded these new ways of thinking, however, was American: Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).

Over the course of the 1960s, the architectural and urban manifestations of the welfare state were increasingly criticized in Europe as well. By then, new large-scale housing estates concentrated a specific layer of the population and, apart from the amenities of everyday life (schools, shops, sports facilities), had nothing to offer; urbanists criticized them as inhuman. Now, new approaches to housing were tested. Accommodating the car was no longer the urbanists' only concern in designing the public domain: near home, *cul de sac* patterns replaced the usual racetrack plans, subordinating the car to the needs of playing children, cyclists, and pedestrians. Often, their layout showed a preference for irregular geometrical patterns that sometimes appeared to emulate organic growth. And the repetitious aspects of mass housing were mitigated by a marked increase of low-rise typologies.

At the same time, housing gained a new meaning. Once it had been part of a social project geared to the needs of fast (and therefore industrial) production, and the regimentation of modern life became even more pronounced with the introduction of modern management techniques in the late 1940s. Now it had to pay tribute to people's psychological needs as well. Allegedly, the days of the homo economicus were numbered, as the home ludens resurfaced. Although these new approaches broke away from earlier expansion models, their protagonists still presented them as modern, actually claiming that they wanted to reenact the ideas of prewar Modernism in its pioneering phase. Whereas in the 1950s, modern planners preferred to position themselves as managers, flatly denying that their job was in any way related to the arts, in the 1970s, art, sociology, and psychology on the one hand, and excursions exploring ways of doing things that were not tainted by the problems of modern life on the other hand, began to dominate many professional journals. Architects and urban planners showed a renewed interest in history (until then a thing to break away from) and a fascination with Africa (not yet corrupted by modern life).

### **Conclusion: The End of Suburbia?**

The two competing political systems showed signs of decay in the 1980s, and faded away after the collapse of socialism in 1989. In the Netherlands, public housing lost its dominant role. However, the preference for planning large-scale housing estates remained, resulting in a remarkable number of huge projects in which private, owner-occupied housing became the rule. Beginning in the 1980s, so-called yuppies (young urban professionals) rediscovered inner cities as ideal places to live, ushering in the first wave of gentrification. Urban life became popular again, a trend that would ultimately reverse the housing preferences of most people, which were increasingly molded by the forces of the free market. Marketeers soon recognized a strong preference for historical architectural and urban models. New Urbanism revitalized the historical repertory of alleys, streets, and squares, practically banned from the urbanist's toolkit since the 1950s, when the distribution of freestanding volumes in a seemingly endless green field was the thing to do. Research in such diverse fields as urban sustainability and health questioned the viability of car-dependent lifestyles, apparently underlining this new model's positive aspects. Today, concentrated, high-density forms of housing, once associated with the social problems and health hazards of the metropolis, have become a hyped attraction. Suburbia, until a decade ago epitomizing the dream of the middle classes, now figures as one of urbanism's most deplorable mistakes.

### **Related Topics**

Massey: Key Planning Histories of the Developing Western Tradition

Kress: The German Traditions of *Städtebau* and *Stadtlandschaft* and Their Diffusion Through Global Exchange

Lopez: Public Health and Urban Planning

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