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Hous-Es Network Presentation : Activity, Experiences and Conclusions, an Analysis Philip Stein Hous-Es thematic expert URBACT programme

In simplified terms housing more than any other aspect determines the global form, configuration, and composition of our cities, it represents the very essence of our urbanity.

However, still, the different housing districts or neighbourhoods that make up our cities are not uniformly thriving or necessarily healthy. Whether it be housing estates, new town typologies or large scale inner city housing areas, problems of the physical stock (obsolescence, poor construction or poor material quality, lack of maintenance, minimum comfort standards, energy intensive forms of building, dubious aesthetic qualities, ...) combine with other urban societal parameters to present urban and regional policy makers, researchers and practitioners with unprecedented challenges - as part of an ongoing and constantly evolving scenario.

Access to a warm, safe and dry shelter protected from the elements is clearly one of our most basic human needs many of us here would argue it is also a fundamental human right. However if housing is considered to be a basic human right it is the further questions deriving from this acceptance which primarily concerned the Hous-Es network:

- which form of housing is adequate and decent and for whom?
- how can qualitative housing solutions be made accessible to people, families, households with low-incomes?
- how can housing provisions contribute to neighbourhood and community rehabilitation?
- how can neighbourhood rehabilitation in turn contribute to sustainable housing?

In an attempt to assess the state of the art in respect of large scale housing provision Hous-Es was initially motivated to reflect on the physical quality of the housing stock in urban housing concentrations - either in housing estates or inner city housing districts. The intention was to review the needs and expectations of residents today, in relation to the standards of accommodation on offer and particularly with reference to neighbourhoods in difficulty. While this objective persisted, almost immediately it was recognised that the questions of housing stock and quality of dwelling could not be dissociated from the wider implications of deprived neighbourhoods in the general sense and the key challenge of providing adequate, decent dwellings to answer the specific needs of populations - households with limited financial means and lacking opportunities themselves to structurally influence the improvement of their living conditions.

Today the persistence and even growth in levels of homelessness is a worrying phenomenon in many European cities, but fortunately the vast majority of citizens would still identify the house as their principal dwelling place. The simple terminology whether it is casa, maison, huis, haz, haus, dum, dom, ... describes a universally recognisable concept and yet hidden behind this simple definition lies a seemingly infinite diversity of significations for residents and policy makers alike. The word "house" projects the image of a sophisticated form of shelter, but the degree of sophistication - from studio apartment to penthouse; semi-detached or detached family house; terraced house; loft; tenement; sheltered house; even caravan or shack - is inextricably linked to the particular circumstances of its inhabitants and other defining contextual parameters, not least of these dictated by questions of tenure and affordability.

Perhaps the first conclusion resulting from network activity is the evident diversity which characterises our collective mass dwelling stock – including housing types, space provision, number of living spaces and disposition, level of facilities and utilities, access and security, light and ventilation, structure, materials and performance levels, energy efficiency and insulation, general architectural values - realising from the outset that these should ideally be weighed against design choices, construction costs and finally affordability issues, while also ensuring that the relationship between private, common and public space is placed in a just and equally qualitative perspective.

This diversity is of course about typologies and conditions of housing but it is also apparent in terms of contexts, experiences and practices (legislation, management structures, tenure models etc,...). Priority challenges are different - in Belgium the private rented sector is currently a main concern, in France the proportion of social housing is still high and in the UK the consequences of demand in terms of localising new housing construction is a major policy issue.

The network deliberated on the question of standards but also recognised the dilemma involved in initiating action to improve the quality of basic affordable housing provision. We should be aware that affordable housing means different things in different local situations.

A house as a shelter or cocoon where people live and sleep is a physical entity, or perhaps a collection of physical entities. We recognise that this fundamental component of our urban fabric is characterised by a particular life-cycle pattern of construction, decay, renovation, obsolescence, demolition, (re-)construction. Often the words house and home are used interchangeably as synonyms to express the image of these physical entities, but just in the very distinction between these terms lies the clue to the prime concern of the Hous-Es network. For these definitions are compatible even interdependent - but should never be confused.

The shelter can be constructed and take form in a very short time span. It has a planned life-cycle which may be extended (by renovation and good maintenance practice), but the building of a home is a completely different phenomenon with a different timescale: it involves individuals or groups of people, young and old, rich or poor, migrant or local; it involves relationships with other homes and families, with activities and surroundings; it involves connection to networks and accessibility, it involves mobility and evolution through time. The container, that is the house, is subject to the needs, the habits and ambitions of its occupants. In this respect there would seem to be a clear analogy between dwelling and household – and city and community.

Experience has brutally demonstrated that often intervention to improve the physical container has had only limited or at best temporary effect in improving the quality of life of the occupants. The confrontation between design and lifestyle as cause and effect in the deterioration of housing areas is a contentious issue but leads inexorably to the conclusion that housing regeneration can only realistically be sustainable if it is coupled with community rehabilitation in the wider sense. So the network was very quickly motivated to tie in the other essential contributory factors confirming a will to develop a holistic perspective and establish effective integrated thinking on achieving sustainable housing.

The public realm is the glue that binds our communities, and it is not simply about open space nor is it about public spaces in the narrow sense of that definition. It is also about communal areas, private even commercial spaces, presence of facilities and the quality of the neighbourhood experience. It is about responsibility for this aspect, and it is about quality of that which we have called the public realm.

The recognition of the interdependence between housing provision and other societal factors does not represent a new awareness. Patrick Geddes (and others) had already made the link between housing, civic society, income and wages, and even the environment, before the first world war - "what is the very core of economic history if not the story of the home". So the aspect of the socio-economic profile and the social dimension as a component of housing was also covered as a matter of priority by the Hous-Es network.

During the last decades many member states have developed alternative models of governance and housing management, adapted legislation and liberalised tenure structures in response to the demands for mass housing provision. Many efforts have been made to review and reinforce the regeneration process seeking to develop effective and economically viable ways of renovating housing stock and construct new affordable housing typologies in situations of exceedingly complex ownership patterns and volatile real estate markets : for example, the modified status of the Dutch "social" housing" agency allowing operation as a private / semi-private operator in the housing market with also the possibility to accept responsibilities traditionally assigned to the public authority such as provision of public space and infrastructure, schools and even commercial premises.

The Hous-Es network was also fortunate to have within the partnership the CEB which allowed us to focus on the questions of funding which are of course crucial to the whole process particularly in contexts of public budget deficit and apparent market disinterest (or no market). In Brno we were able to examine the structure of setting up specific funds to support housing regeneration, to discover the potentials of revolving funding and to broaden awareness of the utility of loan products as part of funding packages which can be constructed from various sources – breaking the mould of traditional provision patterns which can facilitate also more private investment.