

# **LSE CITIES PROGRAMME STUDIO 2007**

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The Cities Programme at the London School of Economics is an innovative centre for teaching and research on urban issues. The Programme studies the relations between the visual, physical and social aspects of cities. We see design as a mode of research and practice that shapes urban environments, responds to urban issues, and connects visual, social and material forms in the city. We take a multi-disciplinary approach to these issues, drawing on expertise and insights from the social sciences, architecture, urban design and other fields. The MSc City Design and Social Science aims to promote a new generation of design professionals and social scientists who can engage with the city in an interdisciplinary manner and have a positive impact on the making of cities and the built environment. The City Design Research Studio is the central unit of the Master's programme, linking theoretical issues and research debates with the practical analysis of problems of city design. It promotes an understanding of the city as a social and built environment, and of the complexities of urban design and development processes.

Each year the Studio includes focused research by students on particular urban themes and contexts. In 2006–7, the Studio examined housing as the key typology that has shaped London's urban fabric, a critical intersection between social and spatial arrangements in the city, and a primary driver of the urban economy. Students worked together in groups to research different aspects of housing in the city; their analyses form the basis of this publication.

# HOUSING AND THE CITY

Urban housing has been a highly contested subject since the nineteenth century. It has exercised the passions of political reformers, who in turn inspired architects and urban thinkers to address these issues in the massive expansion of the industrial city. There were technical challenges, such as how to accommodate unprecedented densities of workers at the same time as achieving modern standards of hygiene. There was also the more existential challenge of how well the modern industrial city could provide an ethical or even moral existence for its inhabitants. Reformers like Ruskin and Morris attacked the very core of the industrial economy as being contrary to a humane way of life, and Dickensian narratives of a thieving urban underclass and documentary descriptions such as those of Jerrold and Doré's 'London: A Pilgrimage' vividly describe the horror and inequities of the industrial city. The late twentieth-century post-industrial city with its globalised social and economic inequities puts forward a new set of challenges for the development of the city as a humane place to dwell for the whole of its population.

Late nineteenth-century England was a hotbed of research into the social and physical conditions of urban dwelling. William Morris, Ebenezer Howard and others put forward positions that stimulated enormous innovations in domestic architecture and planning and whose reverberations continue to be felt today. When Hermann Muthesius undertook his research for the nascent Deutscher Werkbund at the beginning of the twentieth century, England was at the forefront in the development of new housing typologies, in the urban design of settlements and in employing new industrial building techniques in the delivery of large volumes of housing. Muthesius' book 'Das englische Haus' puts the question of urban housing at the heart of the modernist architectural agenda. The huge volume of urban workers' housing that was undertaken on the continent during the interwar period is based on these English models, albeit transformed by a radical political agenda and modernist forms. The interwar expansion of English cities was less idealistic and is typified by the market driven 'metroland' developments of semi-detached houses that followed the construction of the Metropolitan line towards the edges of London. Today, the urban policies and decisions about infrastructural investments in British cities continue to be driven by the demands of the market, by a belief that state investment exists to sustain and bridge the gaps in a production of housing dominated by the market. This is in contrast to

recent programmes of urban expansion undertaken in countries like the Netherlands and Switzerland where the private sector participates within economic and spatial plans developed by the public sector.

Britain played a significant role in the development of urban housing design in the 1950s and 60s. Addressing the postwar housing crisis and fuelled by an active public sector, the architects of the new towns - young practices like Powell and Moya, the youthful architecture department of the London County Council and Neave Brown at the London Borough of Camden - were once again designing housing that attracted wide attention. The impressive and idealistic political commitment to build 300,000 new homes each year was ultimately derailed by social and technical issues. The wholesale displacement of communities, an over reliance on untested large scale industrial building techniques and the inevitable unevenness in the quality of thought and of design in these projects resulted in a deep antipathy towards modern housing estates that persists to today. This failure was convenient for the shift in politics at the end of the 1970s. The failure in levels of funding, in quality of execution and quality of design could be blamed on the whole idea of providing housing through a publicly coordinated programme. The continuing high demand for housing would in the future be satisfied by the market.

The city is again a desirable place to live and after a long period of decline in terms of quality of life and the size of the urban population, England's urban centres are growing. This demand for more households and new housing is largely being met by the private sector, by developers who are understandably motivated by the return on their investment. The inevitable imbalance towards high value housing has been addressed by quite recent legislation that demands alternative kinds of housing, in terms of price and tenure, as a proportion of the total. Many sites that are currently being developed were purchased before the current legislation came into force, so that the provision of 'affordable housing' is additional to what the developer considers necessary to achieve their margin. Encouraged by the high density policies of 'The Urban Task Force' and 'The London Plan' housing developments of unprecedented height and densities are now being built in England. Even at these densities only 18,000 'affordable' homes are coming to the market each year compared to the 180,000 council homes that were built annually in the 1960s. These

high density 'brownfield' projects often necessitate the demolition of underused urban housing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, housing that has been successfully renewed in other situations. It is unclear how a mixture of tenures, lifestyles and expectations can be managed cheek by jowl and already there have been warnings that we might be building a new generation of inner city slum dwellings. Enormous energy is currently being expended by policy makers and developers on the production of sustainable communities. It is unclear, however, what constitutes sustainable development, and what is simply over-development.

The location for our research project this year was Southwark. The Studio was divided into six research clusters, each looking at the provision of housing from a different point of view. It was intended that the overlaps between cluster groups, and between individual and group work, would reveal the enormous complexity that surrounds the policy and materialisation of housing. Southwark has historically been a diverse part of London, its character given as much by marginal social activity and the brutal effects of transportation infrastructures as by any urban policy or civic design. The work of this Studio sought to capture this incredible diversity, at the same time examining the characters and forces that have historically driven the development of this part of London, and the forces driving its future development.

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