

## **Restructuring large housing estates in European cities: an introduction<sup>1</sup>**

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We really believed, in a quasi-religious sense, in the perfectibility of human nature, in the role of architecture as a weapon of social reform ... the coming Utopia when everyone would live in cheap prefabricated flat-roofed multiple dwellings - heaven on earth (Philip Johnson, US architect, quoted in Coleman, 1985, p 3).

... during the evening and night ... a violent disturbance took place at the Broadwater Farm Estate, Tottenham. A police officer ... was killed. Several buildings were set on fire, as well as many motor vehicles ... the disturbances were the most ferocious, the most vicious riots ever seen on the mainland (Broadwater Farm Inquiry, 1986, p 3).

The first quotation refers to the 1930s-1960s, the second to the 1980s. What happened in between? Why did so many large housing estates change from celebrated urban innovations into problem areas no longer liked by their residents? Are the origins of the problems of housing estates internal to the estates themselves or are they simply spatial concentrations of more general problems of society? How widespread are the problems of large housing estates? What are the chances that large estates, developed in haste and proliferating across Europe, will disappear with the same speed?

### **Large housing estates in European cities: an historical note**

All over Europe huge numbers of people live in large housing estates built after the Second World War. The philosophy according to which these estates were built was socially progressive and common to the different European countries involved. The origin of the estates can be traced back to the poor housing situation of the majority of the working classes at the turn of the 20th century. The principal period of construction for the large housing estates, however, came after the devastation of the Second World War, when massive building programmes were needed to replace the dwellings that had been destroyed or damaged in the war, to make up for the lack of housing production during the war, and to house the millions of people searching for a home. Demand for housing was high and further inflated by an unprecedented natural growth of the population in the early post-war years. Hundreds of tower blocks were constructed in the UK, in the *Banlieue* projects of France, and in the 'One Million Programme' in Sweden, and the Netherlands saw new housing estates built in almost every city (Murie et al, 2003).

The early cases were followed by the construction, from the 1960s to the late 1970s, of even more ambitious housing estates, containing large high-rise blocks. Many of these new urban areas were built on the fringes of the cities. Later, large building projects were also completed in Eastern Europe. In addition to dominating the large Eastern European cities, socialist new towns were built, often deliberately sited far away from the existing urban areas, but close to the places where the major new socialist industries (such as steelworks) were located. The estates built in these countries were much larger than those in the West, and the period of construction prevailed much longer, practically until the collapse of socialism in the late 1980s.

Today, about 40% of the population of cities in post-socialist countries lives on large housing estates. In Western European cities this percentage is typically below 10%. The difference between these proportions exemplifies an important fact: large housing estates are far more important relatively in the urban housing markets of the post-socialist cities than in Western Europe.

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Initially, many large housing estates in European countries appear to have conformed to similar design principles (see also Turkington et al, 2004): medium- to high-rise apartment blocks, sometimes (but not always) interspersed with single-family dwellings. The architecture is simple, and the layout of the estates was, at least at the time the estates were built, quite revolutionary. A generation of pre-war modernists (such as Le Corbusier in France, Walter Gropius and Max Taut in Germany, and Oskar Hansen in Poland) put their stamp on the new estates. The result was large blocks, large open spaces between the blocks, and a separation of functions. Carefully designed urban landscapes emerged; they were praised by many urban designers of that period. Positive opinions on, and evaluations of, the large housing estates were very common at the time. In most cases, at the time of construction, the dwellings were considered to be spacious and affordable and many of the estates were characterised by extensive green areas, which were safe and traffic-free. At the same time, many of the estates were socially cohesive communities in which a considerable number of residents were involved in neighbourhood activities.

A closer look at the estates reveals, however, that there were many differences between countries, within countries, and even within cities, even from the initial date of construction. When the appropriate statistics are consulted, an enormous diversity in structures, populations, and problems is revealed. Even greater diversity would have been discovered had the people living in these estates been asked to give their opinions about them as places in which to live.

In many cases the estates were not built for the poorest of the poor. The quality of the housing on the estates was often high, at least compared with the older segments of the city, and this quality was reflected in price terms. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, the dwellings in these areas were not initially affordable for the poorest households, and the tenants who were attracted to the new flats had reasonable incomes. In the socialist countries the allocation mechanisms, rather than property prices, were decisive. In the early years the high-prestige flats were mostly allocated to what were considered the 'deserving' strata of society (Konrád and Szelényi, 1969). As time passed and ever-larger new estates were built in ever-more peripheral locations, the relative position of these newer estates within the local housing market hierarchies fell. In many countries this decline led to cases of large housing estates that were problematic from the beginning, and the poorer and less influential strata of society were deliberately allocated to them.

## **Large housing estates in Europe: the contemporary challenges**

There have been radical changes in the course of the last 20 to 30 years. Many of the assumptions that informed the development of the large estates have been undermined by the dramatic economic, social, and political changes that occurred across Europe during the late 20th century. In particular, the end of the post-war prosperity underwritten by the Keynesian welfare state in Western Europe, and the failure of statist central planning in Central and Eastern Europe have resulted in new forms of social and spatial polarisation. Increasingly, regions, cities and neighbourhoods (not least the large estates) are differentiated according to their position within a new economic and social hierarchy.

The impact of these changes on the large housing estates has been uneven. Many of them continue to function well, economically and socially, and resident satisfaction remains high. Not all large estates are, therefore, problematic. However, an increasing number of large housing estates in European cities are no longer popular. In many areas especially in cities where the initial housing shortages have been eliminated and the large housing estates have consequently been relegated to the bottom of the housing hierarchy - the estates evolved from problem-free and attractive residential neighbourhoods into areas that are very problematic in many respects. Many of these estates now share a long list of common problems although, of course, the combination of problems experienced locally varies considerably (power and Tunstall, 1995; Wacquant, 1996; Hall, 1997; Power, 1997; Evans, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Burrows and Rhodes, 1999; Musterd et al, 1999; Cars, 2000; Costa Pinho, 2000; Kearns et al, 2000; Andersen, 2001; Murie et al, 2003):

- physical decay because of shoddy construction work, rapid attrition and dereliction, and increasing amounts of litter and rubbish in open spaces;
- concentration of households with low incomes;

- low demand and abandonment of dwellings in areas where new and more attractive developments are being built nearby;
- increasing unemployment, because of declining job opportunities in the urban area as a whole, and because of a process of increasing spatial concentration of the unemployed on the large housing estates;
- visible anti-social behaviour: crime, disorderly behaviour, vandalism, drugs, alcoholism, young people loitering;
- social and racial tensions and conflicts among residents;
- high turnover leading to partial breakdown of social cohesion and reduced resident activity;
- deterioration of the housing and management services;
- deterioration of local private (and sometimes also public) services;
- educational problems because of a high concentration of children from poor families or minority ethnic groups in local schools.

The uncritical recital of such a list is dangerous, however. The impression might be conveyed that these problems have taken root and nothing can be done about them. Much of the existing literature tends to view the destiny of housing estates as an inevitable negative trajectory with increasing physical decay, and more and more social and economic problems. This literature seems to deny the significance of social and physical action or policy action in influencing what happens on these estates (see also Power and Tunstall, 1995; Hall, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Vestergård, 1998; Andersen, 1999; Gibb et al, 1999; Morrison, 1999). At the same time, the literature is very much centred on Western Europe and, within Western Europe, very much on the UK. This bias means that we should be very careful in generalising all these problems to estates in other parts of Europe.

In this book we definitely do not accept the proposition that the large housing estates in European cities have reached the limits of their useful existence and that nothing can be done to 'save them' for the future. In fact, in the last decade of the 20th century, housing, spatial, and urban policies were increasingly directed towards large post-war estates: a clear sign of the desire of policy makers and other stakeholders to work towards securing a better future for these areas. Moreover, we would argue that large estates have an important part to play in promoting sustainable urban development more broadly, given their compact morphology, abundant open space, and their potential to benefit from public transport links and the development of green heating and energy systems. In the recent past, other parts of the urban fabric have been the subject of state-led (slum clearance) or market-led (gentrification) restructuring processes, often (but not always) with positive results. It is now the turn of the large estates.

In most cases, however, a better future will not arrive automatically. As we have already observed, the large housing estates do not usually occupy favourable market positions. They are not, for example, attractive places for the processes of spontaneous gentrification. In many cases the estates are places for low- and middle-income households and will probably remain unattractive to higher-income households and other potential investors such as private sector service providers (shops, financial services, for example). In some cases, because of deficient demand or technical failures, radical solutions such as demolition will be necessary to reanimate the appeal of the estates for present and future residents and investors and thereby avoid a future permanently supported by overstretched public service.

Since the late 1990s (and before then in some cases), 'urban restructuring' and 'urban renewal' of large housing estates have become frequently heard catchphrases in many European countries. After the, of ten radical, renewal of older areas, some built before the Second World War, the post-war large housing estates have increasingly become the areas where new policies are needed. Renewal and restructuring policies aim for radical change in post-war neighbourhoods. In some countries this restructuring is clearly directed towards the rectification of physical decline; in other countries social decline has been the main concern. Elsewhere, the desire to make the areas more mixed in terms of housing tenure and the population profile became central to the policy agenda. There has been a clear recognition that improvements can be achieved in every case; although many large housing estates of the second half of the 20th century have become

problematic living areas, most of them still have a future. This future is not assured automatically, however; collaborative efforts to improve their situation are necessary. Many studies have revealed that restructuring and renewal processes are increasingly the result of partnerships between a whole host of actors, including at least some of the following: central government; the relevant ministries; regional government; local government; housing associations; private companies; residents' organisations; and individual residents.

## **Place making, large housing estates, and looking ahead**

The state intervenes in many aspects of people's lives on a daily basis. This intervention is felt most keenly in the context of the large estates, in which the public sector is of ten responsible for meeting the most basic needs of many of the residents (housing, benefits and income, for example). In many European countries, public policy has become preoccupied with the short-term minutiae of managing cities and neighbourhoods, such as the bureaucratic regulation of land use and routine service delivery, much of which takes place in an uncoordinated manner. However, public policy is not usually well adapted to meet:

- (1) *the importance of place*: people who have the resources can choose where to live, work, and invest, while people who do not have these resources are confined to less desirable places; and
- (2) *the importance of diversity*: every place has a multitude of problems (economic, social, environmental, political) and a multitude of stakeholders (central, regional, and local government, business, local residents).

Patsy Healey (1997, 1998a, 1998b) argues for a more proactive approach in which a variety of stakeholders may be mobilised in support of a holistic, long-term vision for an area. Healey argues for the consideration of means to initiate proactive development strategies based on agreements around what places might look like and the opportunities and limitations of transforming them, a process she refers to as 'place making'. A more sophisticated attempt is required than previous physical, economic, or socially deterministic approaches to address the problems of territory - in the context of this book, the large estates. In our opinion, place making (see Chapter 3) can be seen as an essential feature for the large housing estates in Europe, since place making might help in many cases to find ways to improve the situation in these problematic areas. Collaborative planning and place making are therefore two central concepts in this book.

This choice is not based on a belief that the specific problems of places (on large estates, for example) are generated exclusively locally and, by implication, may be resolved by local intervention (a belief that has handicapped the area-based approach that has traditionally characterised estate regeneration in Europe). Rather, the notion of place making - the pursuit of positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes in a given place - acknowledges the impact of a variety of causal processes operating at different spatial levels and the need for multi-level intervention by a variety of stakeholders.

The concept of place making does not imply that all problems are local and have local origins and can be resolved locally. We wish to point out from the outset that care should be taken to avoid overenthusiastic concentration on the local arena. The following notions should, as a minimum, be taken into account when looking at the problems and possible solutions with respect to large housing estates:

- The problems of large housing estates are, to a significant extent, the expressions of more general economic, demographic, and sociocultural developments (see also Murie et al, 2003, for example). The post-industrial transformation of the economy in the late 20th century decimated employment opportunities in almost all European cities. The unemployed are likely to find themselves in a position of declining income and declining choice in the housing market, and thereby relegated to the cheapest housing alternatives and the most unattractive neighbourhoods. Increasing immigration may increase the number of people looking for a home and the competition for dwellings. In neighbourhoods where demand exceeds supply for some dwelling types, some people might find themselves in situations they find undesirable and inappropriate. Conversely, some households may face increasing choice as a result of a combination of rising incomes and newly built alternatives elsewhere. Those people who can afford to do so will vacate the problematic areas, to be replaced by others who move more through compulsion than choice.

- The quantitative and qualitative supply of housing in a housing market can affect the position of large housing estates. In the case of a tight housing market, there is a significant chance that some areas that are not very attractive may remain relatively popular because of the lack of alternatives. When supply exceeds demand, the chances of vacancies in the most unattractive areas of the city are much greater.
- A crucial factor affecting housing estates is the process of housing allocation. In the case of public rental housing, local housing officers act as keepers (Pahl, 1975), of ten discriminating against certain housing estates through the allocation of dwellings to problem families.
- In Western European welfare states, decisions made by central government can have an effect on the characteristics of large housing estates and their position in the housing market. For example, a decision to demolish certain large housing estates will have an impact on not only these estates, but also estates not directly affected by the demolition policy.
- Decisions made by local government authorities can also affect large housing estates. For example, decisions to invest scarce capital resources might affect some areas positively and other areas negatively.
- The role of various non-public institutions, such as housing associations and private developers, can be crucial. The red-lining practices of banks and the prejudice of employers towards residents of certain areas can be very influential.
- The attitudes of all kinds of people not living on the estates can be important. First, all professional organisations are staffed and managed by people. The crucial role of these managers has been stressed by authors such as Pahl (1975, 1977), Lipsky (1980), and Tomlins (1997). Staff may find themselves torn between pressures that originate from the management board, the housing consumers, colleagues, and, of course, their own preferences (Karn, 1983; Murie et al, 2003).
- Changes in some areas invariably effect changes in other areas. Spill-over effects (see also Chapter 8) always occur. The dispersal of some groups from one area will almost inevitably lead to new concentrations in other areas.

## **The context of this book**

The research material for this book has been drawn substantially from the EU Fifth Framework research project RESTATE, an acronym for: 'Restructuring Large-scale Housing Estates in European Cities: Good Practices and New Visions for Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Cities'. This cross-national research project took place in ten countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK), in 16 cities, and in 29 estates in the time period November 2002 to October 2005.

The principal aim of this research was to find out how large housing estates built in the first three or four decades after the Second World War have developed in physical, social, and economic terms. In the project, we have paid explicit attention to the role of policies and other actions aimed at improving the quality of life on these estates.

Following Anne Power (1997), we have defined post-Second World War 'large housing estates' as "areas built in the second half of the 20th century as groups of at least 2,000 housing units that are recognised as distinct and geographical areas, planned by the state or with state support". Some more detailed information on RESTATE, and the research methods used in this project, can be found in the Appendix.

From the beginning we decided to include ten European countries in the project. The basic idea behind this selection was that we should have a representation of all geographical parts of the European Union (EU) (north, east, south and west), in order to have countries with different historical and political backgrounds. We considered it especially important to have a number of Central European countries in the project, first, because these countries have witnessed radical political reforms in the past 15 years and, second, because large housing estates are a very prominent phenomenon of the urban housing markets in most of these countries. Also we wanted to include both larger countries, such as France and Germany, and smaller countries, such as Slovenia and the Netherlands.

Large post-war estates are now prominent on the policy agendas of all Western European countries. *France* developed a high-profile policy agenda following disturbances on some estates. In France the Habitations à loyers modérés [low-rent dwellings], which tend to be the major societies of housing suppliers in these areas, are relatively independent of local government, and the areas concerned are often located on the periphery of cities. In *the UK*, local government is often the owner of property as well as the provider of services. Many of the estates built in the post-Second World War period were built in different parts of cities and associated with slum clearance. In *the Netherlands* concern about segregation and deprivation on large estates has generated action. The Netherlands has financially independent housing associations but at the same time a strong interventionist tradition of government. In *Sweden* the organisation of housing is different again and the role of social partners is more specifically built into policy making.

In Southern Europe the situation of large housing estates is rapidly changing. In *Italy* these estates were built to house rural-urban migrants and also those moving from South to North. In *Spain* these areas were built at a different stage in economic development associated with rural-urban migration and under the previous political regime. Owner-occupation is much more prominent in these countries compared to those of Western Europe.

There are several examples of estates operating in transitional economies. In *Germany* distinctive features can be identified but in this project we mainly refer to estates in East Germany, built under a different political system. In addition to the German examples of estates operating in transitional economies we have included two large (*Hungary, Poland*) and one smaller (*Slovenia*) Eastern European transitional economy. This enables us to reflect upon the different contexts and resources that affect policy initiatives both now and in the future. Especially in the Central European countries privatisation is a crucial process affecting the lives of individuals in the large housing estates, as will become clear later in this book.

With respect to the cities under review we focus on a wide variety. Capitals (such as Amsterdam, Budapest and London) as well as former industrial cities (such as Birmingham and Milan) have been included. Large cities (Lyon, Berlin) as well as smaller ones (Koper in Slovenia, and Utrecht in the Netherlands) have formed part of the research. In the selected cities at least one but in most cases two or more large post-war estates have been identified as research locations.

Can the results of this study be generalised? This is a question that can only be answered very cautiously. Within this book we will make clear in many places that when interpreting the results with respect to the different estates in this project, the national and local context should never be overlooked. This means that local circumstances and developments are always at least partly shaped by developments on different spatial levels. In other words, developments within an estate should always be interpreted with various elements of the local and national context in mind. The same holds for policies. Policies might look more or less the same in different estates. However, it may well be that these policies find their origins in very different ideas, that the organisation of these policies is rooted in very different traditions and that the outcomes of policies and other actions depend much more on other factors than the policies themselves. Again, different contexts may be decisive.

Believing in the contextuality of developments must mean that generalisation is at least difficult, if not impossible. However, we do believe that some generalisations are possible, as long as the contextual developments are kept in mind. Throughout the book some generalisation may be found, and especially in the last chapter. But again and again we want to stress that developments within one estate, city or country cannot automatically be generalised to other estates, cities and countries.

## The structure of this book

The specific contribution of this book compared with other publications on large housing estates is that it has grown out of a comparative exercise in which the housing estates of ten countries were analysed against a common framework (see previous section). The chapters in this book have been written by multi-national teams, drawing on original research into the economic, social, and cultural experiences of a number of estates.

The book concentrates on a number of topics that we consider essential for the present and future position of the large housing estates in their respective cities and housing markets. The chapters are grouped into three main parts.

In the first part of the book we present the basic information that is needed to understand the more detailed topics which follow. For this first part we have formulated the following research question:

What factors and developments are crucial for the development and present state and position of large housing estates in European cities?

In Chapter Two Dekker and van Kempen provide a quantitative overview of the present state of the large housing estates that stand central in this book (see Table 2.1). This chapter makes it clear that although there are broad similarities between estates in European cities, they are most definitely not all the same. Their diversity is crucial when implementing policies. Chapter Three, written by Hall and Rowlands, is a more theoretical chapter, in which the concept of place making is elaborated and where the notion of collaborative planning is introduced. This chapter provides a theoretical framework for the book. In Chapter Four, Hall, Murie, and Knorr-Siedow describe the (historical) developments that have been crucial in influencing the evolution of large housing estates in European cities. This chapter provides a general historical background to the estates. In Chapter Five, the crucial process of the privatisation of housing is discussed by Murie, Tosics, Aalbers, Sendi, and Černič Mali. Privatisation is a crucial process, not only in the post-socialist countries, but also in Western European countries, where it appears in different forms with differential effects for the estates.

In the second part of the book, the focus is on the ideas that lie behind the policies that are implemented on large housing estates. In this part it is not the policies themselves, but the ideas and philosophies behind these policies that are central. The following research question is addressed in this part of the book:

What ideas and philosophies inform potential policy interventions in European large housing estates?  
What are the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches?

In Chapter Six, the concept of *social cohesion* is addressed. This concept has become crucial in the academic literature and in political practice, not least in EU research programmes. In terms of urban policies, particularly those concerning the future of large housing estates, the idea of social cohesion can be seen as a crucial notion. In this chapter, Dekker and Rowlands investigate the problematic issues and the opportunities for creating social cohesion in large housing estates with mixed population compositions.

Another crucial concept in present-day urban restructuring policies is the idea of social mix. In general, social mix in housing estates is seen in a positive light: a socially mixed neighbourhood would create better opportunities for the people living there. In Chapter Seven, Andersson and Musterd consider the validity of this idea.

In Chapter Eight, Musterd and Ostendorf take up an idea that many studies have often neglected: that of displacement effects. The idea is that when policy interventions are applied in one area, that area may experience some positive effects (and these positive effects are often mentioned in evaluation studies), but the problems may be exported to other areas where they might become just as severe as they were in the original areas. It will be evident that the supposed effectiveness of policies might be reduced when one looks across the borders of a narrowly defined target area.

When areas are restructured, the most important effect is that some people can stay in the area where they used to live, while others have to move. When inexpensive housing stock is demolished, or upgraded, and replaced by more expensive stock, the new dwellings will not be affordable for low-income households. In some cases, this is the precise reason underlying the demolition and rebuilding. BråmÅ and Andersson address the question 'who stays and who moves?' in Chapter Nine, drawing on the Swedish estates as an example.

The third part of this book concentrates on policy intervention and the organisation of the policies. The contents of the policies, as well as the way they are organised, are central here:

Which policy interventions are important in large housing estates in European cities? How are they organised? How effective are they?

These questions have been addressed from a number of perspectives and are discussed in several chapters. When discussing the restructuring and renewal of housing estates, it is clear that demolition can be seen as one of the most radical interventions. Demolition can be used as an intervention for various reasons. Rebuilding an area can be carried out in different ways, with different aims in mind. In Chapter Ten the reasons for demolition and the aims of rebuilding are assessed critically by a French team of researchers (Belmessous, Chignier-Riboulon, Commerçon, and Zepf).

Chapter Eleven concerns the partners in the restructuring process and the ways in which they work together. In their case study of Italian and Spanish estates, Mugnano, Pareja-Eastaway, and Tapada-Berteli argue that different kinds of partnership are feasible and that each kind has its own advantages and liabilities. In Chapter Twelve, participation within neighbourhoods is discussed. On the basis of a comparison of local participation in neighbourhoods in Dutch and Spanish cities, van Beckhoven, van Boxmeer, and Garcia Ferrando conclude that the level of participation is explained more by neighbourhood characteristics than by national (policy) differences.

Chapter Thirteen, by Pettersson and Öresjö, focuses on local practices to fight unemployment in Swedish large housing estates. Chapter Fourteen is about an increasing problem in large housing estates: inhabitants' feelings of insecurity as a consequence of the criminal behaviour of young people in the area. This chapter also considers the measures taken to curb young criminals. The conclusion drawn by the authors of this chapter (Aalbers, Bielewska, Chignier-Riboulon, and Guszczka) is that different kinds of strategy should be employed to combat criminal behaviour and decrease feelings of insecurity. Chapter Fifteen starts from the question of whether gender mainstreaming is important in restructuring large housing estates. Droste, Molina, and Zajczyk describe the practices in Sweden, Germany, and Italy. These authors conclude that gender sensitivity is of great importance in urban development processes, but that there are still many constraints, especially in the interactions between top-down incentives and bottom-up initiatives.

Chapter Sixteen, by Knorr-Siedow and Tosics, gives an account of the role of knowledge. This chapter is not about a policy concept, but is organised around the question of how to use (scientific) knowledge in different practical situations.

Chapter Seventeen, the concluding chapter, summarises what feasible future there might be for the large housing estates in European estates.

Most chapters in this book do not feature all the 29 estates that are incorporated in the RESTATE project. We have deliberately chosen to publish an edited volume in which certain topics that are, in our opinion, essential with respect to large housing estates are central in the chapters. After selecting these topics, we selected the estates, cities, and countries in which each topic could best be described and explained. This gave us the opportunity to deal with the central topics in more depth than would have been the case had we been obliged to cover all 29 estates.

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