# THE WELFARE STATE TOWER BLOCK

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It was around 1900 when Central European experts and those from further east began to take notice of the general pattern of English housing. To those who were getting used to the way their cities grew in leaps and bounds, mushrooming with gigantic blocks of *Mietskasernen*, the small rows of suburban houses in England appeared insubstantial and even (to some) laughable; but others saw in them the future way of all healthy housing. Every English family, including a large section of the working classes, appeared to inhabit its individual dwelling, with at least a minimal garden or yard attached. Privacy, closeness to the ground, light and air: it seemed a miraculous thing to Germany's premier town planning theorist, Rudolf Eberstadt. Why, it was asked by many, did the vast majority of Continental town dwellers have to put up with what appeared just darkness, foul air and overcrowding? Why are some countries seemingly compelled to build high blocks of flat while others are not? When England formulated the Garden City ideal around 1900, immediate admiration seemed ensured throughout the world. Many countries soon brought out translations of Ebenezer Howard's new town planning theory. In the years immediately after World War II, the same generation of English planners of world-renown revitalised the Garden City idea in their New Towns policy, again to the admiration of many other countries.[1]

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[1] See R. E b e r s t a d t, *Handbuch des Wohnungswesens und der Wohnungsfrage*, G. Fischer: Jena 1909; R. E b e r s t a d t, *Die städtische Bodenparzellierung in England*, Heymann: Berlin 1908; cf. S. M u t h e s i u s, *The English Terraced House*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London 1984.

And yet, the successors to that generation of English architects and planners performed a radical turn precisely in those years: a turn towards the multi-storey block of flats. Naturally, this did not mean abandoning the low-rise form of building, which remained the dominant model in England (and to a lesser extent in Scotland, where a strong tradition of urban tenement flats had been evident for a long time); but the number of such blocks did reach 20% of all newly built public housing during some years of the 1960s. Thus the country with the lowest overall density of housing in Europe sports as many tower blocks as most other countries; in fact, English and Scottish high blocks often appear more prominent because there are fewer of them, and they are on average higher than their brethren elsewhere, they certainly appear more daring than the average Socialist Bloc housing estate.[2]

Naturally, explanations for this situation vary. Architectural historians will point to the influence of Continental European, especially German, modernism in the 1930s. Indeed, in 1936 Walter Gropius had emigrated to Britain. In his baggage were his schemes for high-rise housing, for which he argued that they guaranteed more sun and greenery for every flat than any other type of dwelling (ill. 1).[3] International Modernity was the watchword for many architects of the younger generation; it was felt that Britain had lagged behind during the 1920s and was outshone not only by Germany and Holland (ill. 2), but even by countries further east, such as young Czechoslovakia. Altogether, Britain was felt to be a country in need of a shake-up. During the 1940s, international modernist architecture went from strength to strength, but it was only by about 1960 that British traditionalism appeared to have been completely overcome, again much later than in most other European countries. English architects were painfully aware that even during the 1950s important build-

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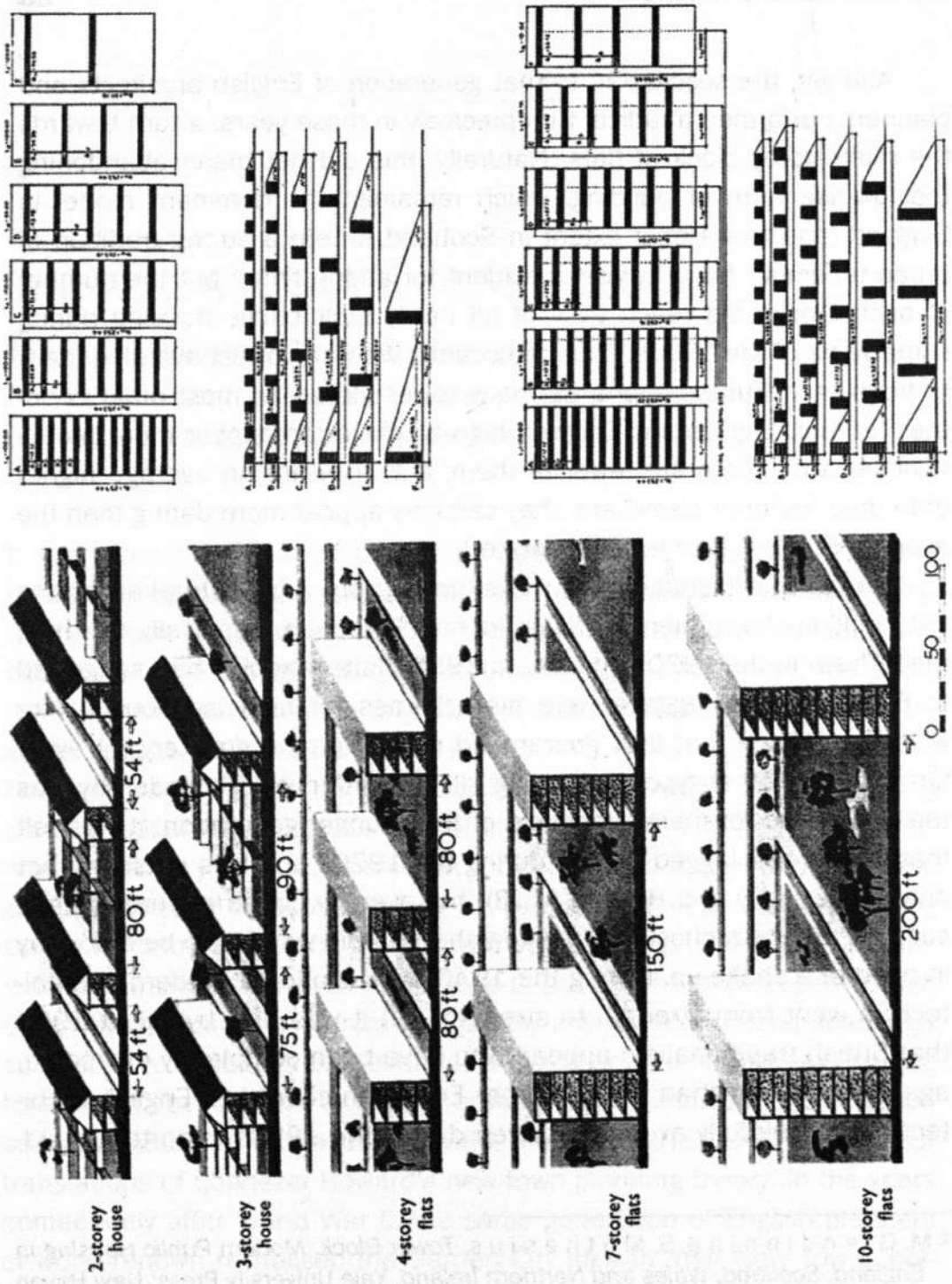
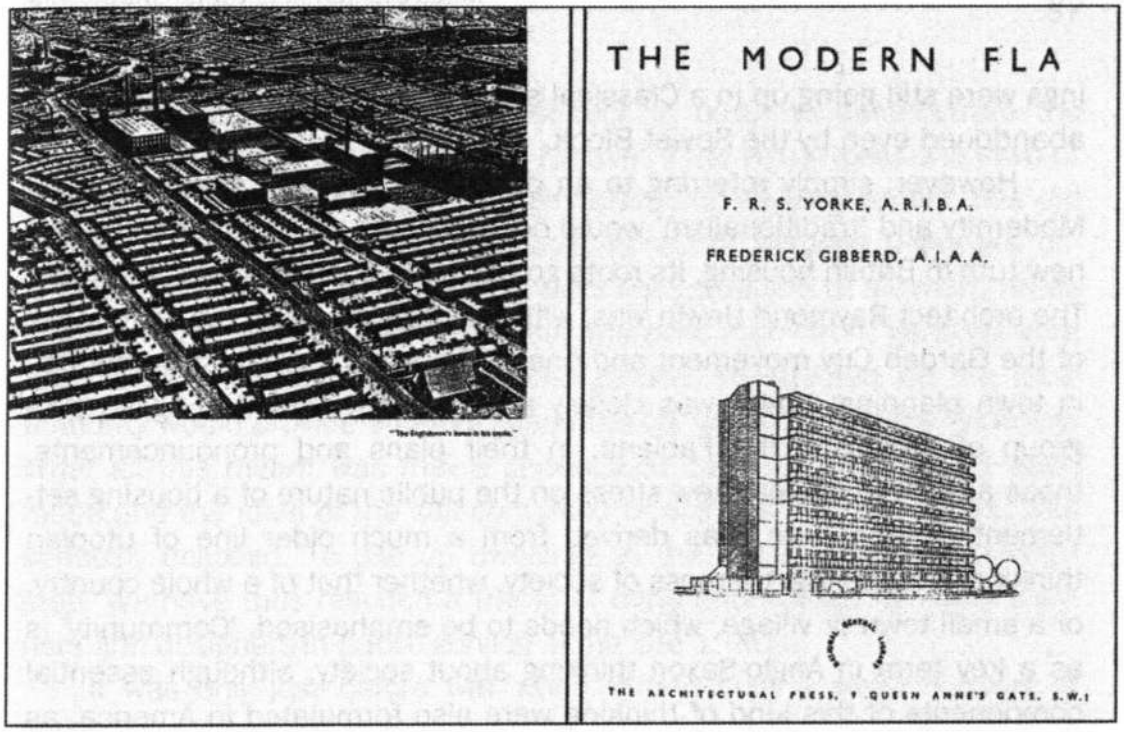
[2] M. Glendinning, S. Muthesius, *Tower Block. Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, Yale University Press: New Haven - London 1994; cf. A. Ravetz, R. Turkington, *The Place of Home: English Domestic Environments, 1914-2000*, Spon: London 1995; I. Colquhoun, *The RIBA Book of 20th British Housing*, Butterworh-Heinemann: Oxford 1999. Cf. also K. Doerhoefer (ed.), *Wohnkultur und Plattenbau. Beispiele aus Berlin und Budapest*, Dietrich Reimer Verlag: Berlin 1994.

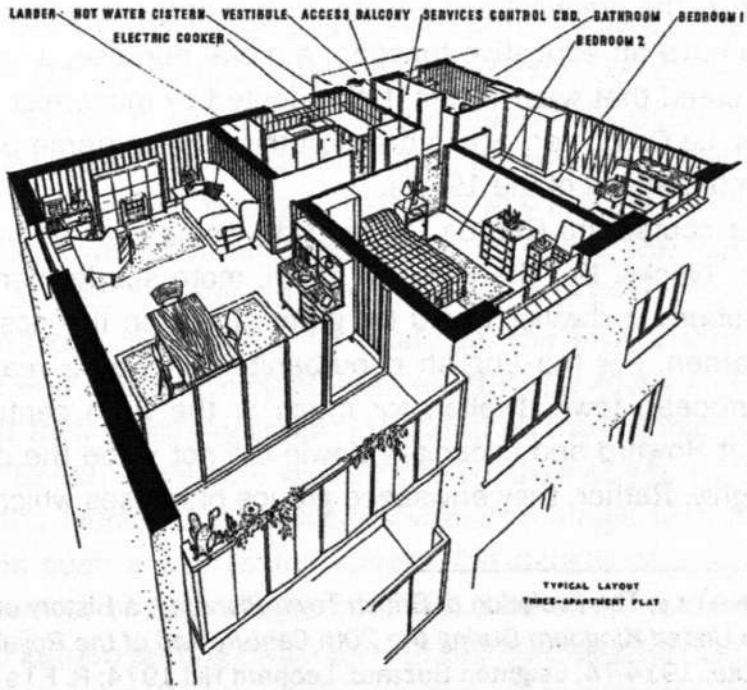
[3] W. Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, Faber & Faber: London 1935.




1. The advantages of high blocks of flats with regard to access to light and air; left: diagram from E. J. Carter & E. Goldfinger, *The County of London Plan,* 1945 - a simplified version of Walter Gropius' analysis in *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (1935), London 1945 (right)




2. A book of 1937 contrasts a new block in Rotterdam (Bergpolder Flats) with Victorian working class housing Preston




3. Kirkcaldy, Valley Gardens, a Scottish 'council flat' of 1954 (*The Builder,* 1955, 9 September, p. 435)

ings were still going up in a Classical style, at a time when this had been abandoned even by the Soviet Block.

However, simply referring to an opposition between straightforward Modernity and 'traditionalism' would not suffice as an explanation for the new turn in British housing. Its roots go back into a long socialist tradition. The architect Raymond Unwin was, with Ebenezer Howard, the co-founder of the Garden City movement and one of the world's greatest authorities in town planning; Unwin was closely allied to that peculiar English subgroup of socialists, the Fabians. In their plans and pronouncements, those around Unwin put new stress on the public nature of a housing settlement. This, in turn, was derived from a much older line of utopian thinking. It is the togetherness of society, whether that of a whole country, or a small town or village, which needs to be emphasised. 'Community' is as a key term in Anglo-Saxon thinking about society, although essential components of this kind of thinking were also formulated in America, as well as in Europe, with Toennies, Tolstoy and Kropotkin as important gurus.[4] What is crucial to note is that the town planner and the architect of the 20th century entertains a strong demand that building a home should not only satisfy the practical and private desires of the dwellers (ill. 3), but should also have an educative function, a moral purpose, a social policy element; a creed that was, in turn, fully adopted by modernist architects, like Gropius, Le Corbusier, not to mention the more extreme Soviet Modernist communitarians of the 1920s.

Now, of course, no Garden City apostle would ever be found advocating tower blocks. But the issue is, again, more subtle than that. The 'ordinary' suburban dweller would lay great stress on the possession of a private garden. For the English suburbanite this was a reality, to the average European town dweller, for much of the 20th century, it was a dream. But Howard and especially Unwin did not value the private garden very highly. Rather, they envisaged groups of houses which were sur-

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[4] Cf. G. E. C h e r r y, *The Evolution of British Town Planning: a History of Town Planning in the United Kingdom During the 20th Century and of the Royal Town Planning Institute*, 1914-74, Leighton Buzzard: Leonard Hill 1974; R. F i s h m a n, *Urban Utopias in the twentieth century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier*, MIT Press: Cambridge MA, 1982; E. H o w a r d, *Garden Cities of To-morrow, 1899* (1st published as *To-morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, S. Sonnenschein: London 1898).

rounded by publicly accessible greenery, in order to demonstrate the open, public face of the townscape. Further, if the visual ideal of a town or suburb was that the houses were embedded in lavish greenery, this did not have to mean a mass of private, individual gardens. Planners observed that many private gardeners were not gardeners at all; many areas behind their houses looked neglected, and even many front gardens were not cared for. Thus an open, public garden, maintained by the local authority would provide a better guarantee for universal healthy greenery. What all this meant was that a generalised case for the flat had been made and the ideal of the self-contained dwelling on its own ground was seriously eclipsed. To pile up dwellings in the air was only one further step. We have thus reached a frame of mind entertained by many planners and designers in public service in the late 1930s.

It was only just before war when Britain built a small number of blocks more than six stories in height. And even after 1945 height was only increased slowly. There was little experience in high construction generally; for many years designers and builders pondered the choice of steel frame and reinforced concrete construction. But by the early 1950s blocks of eleven floors became common, with mostly the London architects in the pioneering role. From the mid-1950s the number of floors rose above fifteen. It was noted that up to about 11 floors construction appeared relatively simple, but above that, the issues of building technology gained greatly in importance. That was why in Sweden, for instance, very few blocks were built with more than 15 floors, whereas in Britain, during the 1960s, a large number of blocks with more than 20 storey were constructed. In Glasgow, for example, the record was 31 floors, held by the Red Road development, in enormously costly steel construction, said at their commencement (1962) to be the highest council flats in Europe. British architects usually prided themselves in the careful placing of the blocks. Considerations varied: A single high block could be placed in such a way as to increase the density of an inner urban shopping centre; or high blocks could also be used in an edge-of-city landscaped garden setting (such as with the Roehampton Estate next to London's Richmond Park), where the argument was the high blocks helped to save old trees. One of the most complex pieces of reasoning was the 'mixed development' concept. Here the main argument was that in any given development the provision of high blocks would free

space to provide a certain of houses with gardens, while the overall high density and the savings in the costs of land could be maintained.

After the explanation through high-flown socio-political ideology, and the variety of complex design convictions, there came the economic-and political realities. The war brought a gigantic housing shortage; through bomb damage, lack of building and because of the way the British were already used to a relatively high standard of housing, for instance in their very low rate of shared dwellings. A more complex issue was what appeared as the perennial 'housing problem'. This could cover a whole spectrum of dwellings, from the oldest, most dilapidated buildings in or near the centre of towns, almost always inhabited by the poorest sector of the population, to all kinds of housing which were basically sound, but were not liked by the Modernist designer on architectural grounds, such as the common Victorian terrace of houses. For those on the left, all privately developed housing was suspect. In any case, the 'housing problem' meant that there was always a stock of housing which had to come down, which in turn, increased the demand for new dwellings even more. This all helped to create an atmosphere of tremendous urgency. People had to be 'given homes', as quickly as possible. It appeared that only the state could provide them.

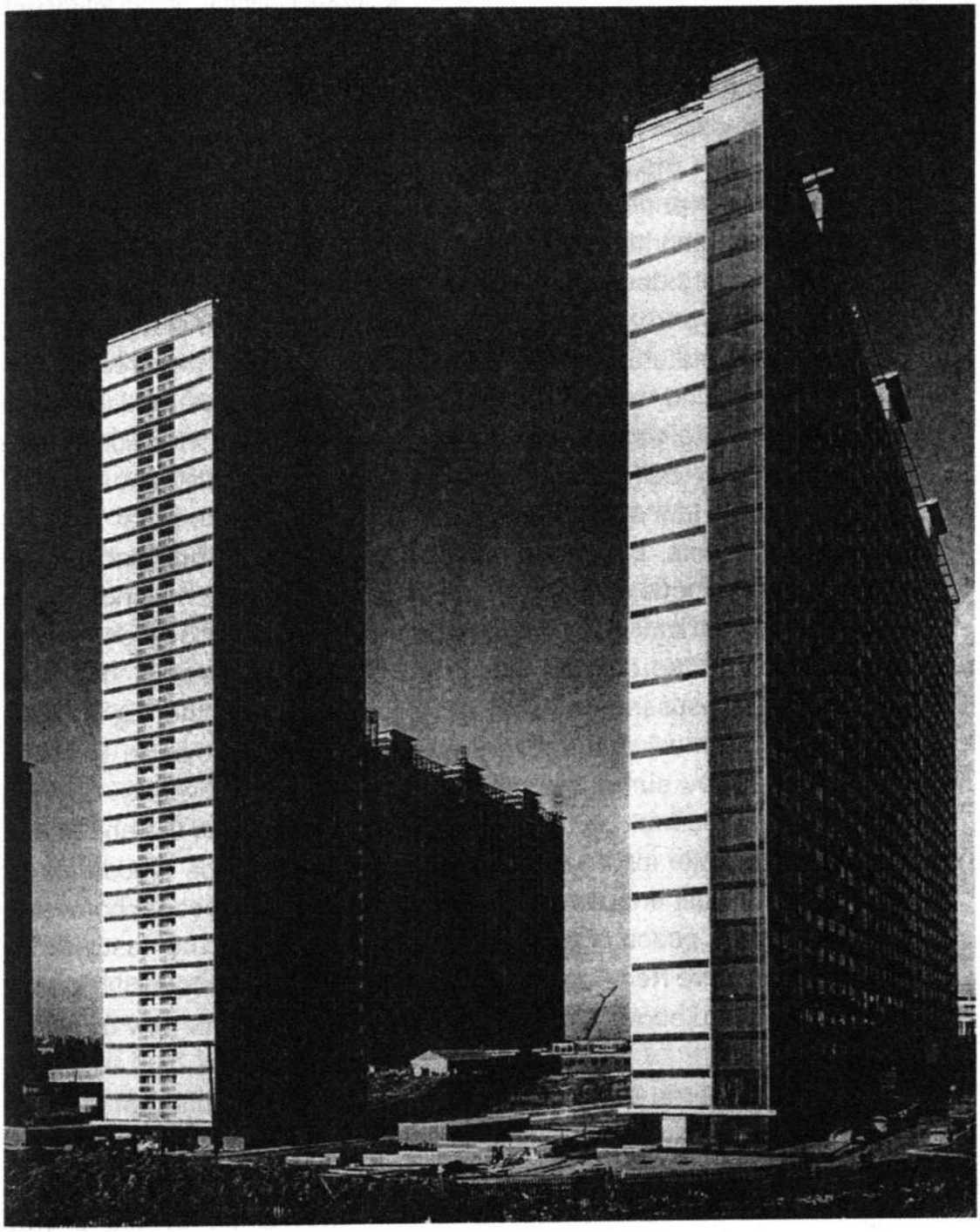
As such, this step was not new after World War II. Britain had introduced large-scale state-subsidised housing, like many other European countries, around 1919. But state subsidies took another turn under the newly instituted British Welfare State. It was introduced by the Labour party, although for many spheres one would not, then, detect a fierce opposition from the Conservatives. It was the 'postwar spirit' which appeared to unite most members of the British people, in one way or another. The greatest feat of the new system was the introduction of universal health care. Since 1946 it has been virtually free for every citizen of the kingdom, paid from general and special taxation. Likewise, thoroughgoing reforms were introduced in the public education system. The third plank of the reform process was housing. 'Public housing' in Britain now assumed a role it had never enjoyed before. Many reformers and officials, such as Dame Evelyn Sharp, a senior civil servant, believed that this, too, should be seen as a public service for all. State-subsidised housing was not merely aimed at the poor, but should comprise the whole of the population. The Welfare State was decidedly not to be seen as the con-

tinuation of the charitable movements of the past. While of course in constitutional terms this was not to be equated with advanced socialism (although some designers and planners did belong to the Communist party of Great Britain) the spheres of health, education and housing were to be effectively state run, with the 'goods' being financed, provided and administered by public officials. All this was put into practice immediately after the war; for a decade or so virtually all newly built housing was state-supported as restrictions in the distribution of building materials meant that the private sector was simply not able to build. Of course, it has to be remembered that alongside the state sphere of housing there still was the private market in the buying and renting of existing housing as well as a continuing growth of owner-occupation in outer suburban housing.

One other sphere exercised a crucial role in all this. Probably more than in most countries, certainly much more than in the towns of Eastern Europe, the power of the municipality played a key role. The central state issued the laws, parliament created the framework of legitimacy, but it was the municipality which put everything into practice and which undertook much of the administration of the Welfare State's institutions, certainly in the case of housing. There exists, in Britain, strictly speaking no 'state housing'; almost all public housing (a term used frequently in America, but not liked in Britain) is municipal housing, or for short, 'council housing', or 'corporation housing', because the authority that rules over the housing is, constitutionally, the council or the corporation in each town; the key figures in practice were the housing architect and the housing manager, appointed by the council.

In Britain, as elsewhere, the social concern of the town councils predated, by a long way, the social concerns of the central state. The key term here is 'corporate'. The chief members of such a corporation are usually a small number of councillors who certainly profess to act in the interest of those who elected them, but who usually display a good proportion of self-interest and of rivalry with the interests of their fellow councillors or with the agents of the region or the central state. In every case, a strong element of local pride could be assumed. 'Public works' had been a sphere of strong council activity since the 19th century. Towns prided themselves on the most modern municipal refuse collection or water supply. The 'housing department', with the housing manager, working in close connection with the housing architect, all over-


4. The opening of the 10.000th postwar council dwelling in the London Borough of Enfield in 1957, with the Minister Housing and Local Government, Anthony Greenwood



5. Glasgow, Red Road Flats, 1965-6

seen by the councillor-chairman of the housing committee. The latter's power in the decision-making process was crucial.

Up and down the country, the tower block was thus a story of municipal power and pride. London was, as always, an exception, as it had two municipal authorities, firstly that comprising the whole of the area, the London County Council, and those of the individual boroughs. Both vied for electoral and also architectural attention in their house-building activities (ill. 4). Naturally, it was the larger cities where the greatest enthusiasm was found, but there were exceptions as far as medium-sized municipalities were concerned, such as even 'medieval' Norwich, where at one time over half of all dwellings were council-built and council-owned, although few of them are multi-storey. It was the great Midland and Northern towns, Birmingham, Liverpool, Sheffield and Leeds which provided an enormous development of council housing of all kinds; some of them priding themselves more with architectural innovation, others more simply with the quickest and most economic provision. The most powerful public housers, however, were to be found in the big Scottish cities. Here, the municipal tradition was even stronger than in England. The City of Glasgow surpassed them all in quantity and diversity. Councillor and Housing Committee Convener, Donald Gibson, was the epitome of the tireless enabler of council housing. He pushed for thousands of dwellings to be built annually in his city alone. 'Give the people homes ..., let mothers have peace of mind with a decent home'.[5] The vastly ambitious and expensive Red Road flats, the peak of Glasgow council housing, already mentioned above, were the climax of this 'drive' for new dwellings (ill. 5).

The last factor in the equation, the third of the agents that were instrumental in building the blocks, was of course the building industry. While some town councils occasionally employed their own building workforce, the bulk of housebuilding was undertaken by the private building industry. Thus while client and designers belonged to the public sphere, the building process remained largely a capitalist undertaking. Normally it was large firms, operating nationwide, who built the high blocks. In the early years after the war the usual pattern of builders com-

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[5] See chapter ' *"Give the People Homes!" Scotland's Housing Blitzkrieg*', in M. Glendinning, S. Muthesius, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-246.

peting for contracts was the norm, but with increasing shortages of labour, the ties between the client and the builder became closer. The ever increasing height of the blocks and the accompanying new issues of construction and safety brought ever closer and more complex kinds of cooperation between the building firms and the design and housing authorities. This culminated in 1960s when Britain, following France and Scandinavia and paralleling the Eastern European countries, adopted large-scale prefabrication methods; now it was the building firms which not only built but also designed the blocks. Thus at the high point of public provision of dwellings, during the mid-1960s, when building proceeded most rapidly and when the proportion of high and super-high blocks was at its peak, the share of capitalist industry in the process was also at its height, forming a singular kind of public-private symbiosis.

But this was also precisely the moment from which we date the eclipse of the high block in public housing in Britain. Perhaps no country espoused the tower block of flats so fervently, but certainly no country condemned it so violently. In Britain, the rise and the fall of the tower block appear to be part of the same story. The reasons for this are extremely complex. What has so far appeared as a smooth operation and a product of consensus, could also be construed as the result of a number of diverging interests. A councillor chiefly had in mind his/her voters; the architect his/her specific design style, the building firm its profits. Moreover, consensus was never considered the ultimate aim in the British political system. Enthusiasms and dissatisfaction often follow in each other's footsteps. The public printed and broadcast discourse, 'the media', take their share in rendering every important topic controversial. An agent in the process of the building of the blocks which has so far not been mentioned was the professional press. From the 1930s until the 1960s it played an enormous role in propagating modernity. Up to the early 1950s the *Architectural Review* treated even a minor high block as an architectural innovation of the highest order. Barely fifteen years later it led the party of the downfall of the high block. From the later 1960s the daily and general periodical press, as well as TV, joined in, and roundly condemned all high blocks, and many even condemned council housing in principle.[6]

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[6] Cf. ibidem, pp. 308-327.

One thing appeared incomprehensible, so all these voices would now claim, namely that the whole process had up to that point completely left out the one agent who mattered most: the user. What actually did the dwellers want? Did they actually like to live in these high blocks of flats? No, they did not - was the claim from the late 1960s onwards. That was certainly what 'the media' began to say ever more loudly; the architectural profession joined the chorus, as did, soon, the very providers, the municipalities, too, until everybody was of that opinion. Sociological and town planning research which previously had analysed the benefits of dense living now analysed what it saw as the misery of high living. We argued earlier in this article that one can trace, at least in hindsight, some points of connection between the public-minded-garden city movement and the advocacy of flats in a public park - amounting to a special kind of continuity in English planning thinking throughout the 20th century. But to the writers and propagandists of the 1960s and 70s, such thinking would appear outrageous. Everybody felt compelled to return to simplest truth about housing preferences: it was flatly stated that, more than any other people, the English like their individual house with its private garden attached (in Scotland, the 'tenement tradition' meant that the equivalent anti-tower block polemic had a less simplistic ideal).[7]

The explanation for the sudden realisation that the users had not been considered previously was, of course, a complex one. Clearly, in the early days of the Welfare State public housing was still largely considered a gift from the state, or even from the ruling classes to the lower orders. The only appropriate response on the part of the latter was simple gratitude. Secondly, the Welfare state officials, the specialists, the designers felt they knew well what they were providing. Their designs were based on research, which was, by definition, constantly brought up to date. Thus the design of a block of flats was considered the best and the most up to date type of dwelling. Indeed, the contrast between a dark slum dwelling and a bright new block could often not have been more striking. Above all, a 'Modern' dwelling was defined by containing a bathroom. It was emphasised at the beginning that British workers had for a long time been better housed than most of their Continental brethren, however, this applied

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[7] Cf. J. H i l l (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, Routledge: London 1998.

chiefly to the provision of space; far fewer families in Britain had to share one room, but virtually none of the small terraced houses were provided with more than a cold tap in the kitchen. From the 1960s it was, ironically, the success of the Welfare State provision of modernity, within its own definition, which led to a new situation where these achievements were taken for granted and criticism of them arose more easily.[8]

Since that era of polemical criticism and sudden disgrace, the tower block has had a chequered career in Britain. Many multi-storey housing schemes were simply pulled down. Often the groups of municipal tower blocks now house the poorest groups of the population. They are thus inevitably considered the same as the old slums which they had replaced. Other blocks, especially in London, where housing is generally so much more expensive than elsewhere, have been revitalised, privatised, and even 'gentrified'. In the 1990s some new blocks were built in favoured spots in London as luxury high-living. In the last few years one may see signs of a 'folklorisation' of the tower block, linked to a new, capitalist-commodified chic 'revival' of the imagery of the early Welfare State. At any rate, whether one likes them or not, the towers do form an ubiquitous part of the urban landscape, and may thus eventually lose their threatening character, as well as all traces of their original ideological message. In today's Britain, nobody would venture to predict the future shape or understanding of the Welfare State: Utopian conception or practical expedient?

**List of Illustrations:**

1. The advantages of high blocks of flats with regard to access to light and air; left: diagram from E.J. Carter & E. Goldfinger, *The County of London Plan*, 1945 - a simplified version of Walter Gropius' analysis in *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (1935), London 1945 (right).
2. A book of 1937 contrasts a new block in Rotterdam (Bergpolder Flats) with Victorian working class housing Preston.
3. Kirkcaldy, Valley Gardens, a Scottish 'council flat' of 1954 (*The Builder*, 1955, 9 September, p. 435).

[8] D. F r a s e r, *The Welfare State*, Sutton: Stroud 2000.

4. The opening of the 10.000th postwar council dwelling in the London Borough of Enfield in 1957, with the Minister Housing and Local Government, Anthony Greenwood.
5. Glasgow, Red Road Flats, 1965-6.

## Wieżowiec w państwie opiekuńczym

Jeżeli chodzi o budownictwo mieszkaniowe, Wyspy Brytyjskie są krajem kontrastów. Europa spogląda z zazdrością na słabo zaludnione, przestronne brytyjskie przedmieścia, gdzie rzekomo każda rodzina mieszka w swoim własnym domu z własnym ogrodem. Dużo mniej znane są brytyjskie wielkie bloki, budowane głównie w latach 50. i 60., osądzane dziś w Anglii jako rodzaj „taniego i podrzędnego budownictwa". Ich złożona historia przeczy jednak takim pochopnym osądom. Projektowane przez sławnych architektów i urbanistów, propagowane przez polityków oraz zatrudnianych przez rząd ekspertów opieki społecznej i budownictwa mieszkaniowego, zamawiane przez entuzjastycznych radnych, a wznoszone przez firmy budowlane niestroniące od nowatorstwa i eksperymentu, bloki te wyznaczają ważną fazę w architektonicznej oraz urbanistycznej historii Wielkiej Brytanii. Ich geneza jest jednak bez wątpienia „kontynentalna", zdradzając wpływy Waltera Gropiusa oraz holenderskiej architektury lat 30. Budować wysoko oznaczało budować zdrowo, a wkładem angielskich urbanistów było złączenie niemieckiej i holenderskiej nowoczesności z rodzimą angielską tradycją budowlaną i jej imperatywem zieleni: wysokie bloki pozwalały nie tylko na zwiększenie terenów zielonych, lecz dawały wszystkim ich mieszkańcom pokój z widokiem na park. Po II wojnie światowej sytuacja w Wielkiej Brytanii nie różniła się od innych krajów Europy, na wschodzie czy zachodzie. Wojna zniszczyła substancję mieszkaniową, ale, co o wiele ważniejsze, dawne typy budownictwa mieszkaniowego osądzono jako nieadekwatne. Utopijna wizja słonecznych mieszkań wśród zieleni, wyposażonych w centralne ogrzewanie, łazienkę oraz nowoczesną kuchnię, dostępnych dla „każdego i każdej", stała się motorem spiesznej odbudowy kraju, w której bloki stanowiły znaczny udział. W końcu lat 40. wielu znanych architektów zabrało się do eksperymentów z różnymi typami wysokościowców, przy akompaniamencie nieustających polemik co do „naj-

lepszego" rozwiązania. W rezultacie zróżnicowanie tego rodzaju architektury w Anglii jest większe niż w innych krajach, a niektóre z nowych osiedli, jak Roehampton w zachodnim Londynie, uważane są za najciekawsze zespoły architektoniczne tych lat. Od lat 60. bloki przyjęły się także na prowincji, wkraczając do większości angielskich miast. Choć brytyjskie bloki były finansowane w dużej mierze przez państwo, to za sam proces ich budowy odpowiedzialne były miasta. Takie cechy jak wysokość oraz nowoczesny wygląd stały się sprawą politycznego prestiżu w skali lokalnej, oraz – choć nie wyłącznie - wyznacznikiem lewicowej orientacji władz municypalnych. Na przestrzeni lat 60. stosunek do bloków radykalnie się zmienił, a w następnej dekadzie ten typ budownictwa mieszkaniowego został gruntownie potępiony tak z powodów estetycznych, jak i socjalnych, prowadząc do wysadzenia w powietrze wielu osiedli. W latach 90. stosunek do bloków został po raz kolejny przewartościowany, a znaczenie przypisywane im obecnie, w erze Post-Welfare State, jest ciągle nieostre.