

The transformation of collective housing estates

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All over Europe large-scale, collective housing estates from the 1970s and '80s are undergoing drastic change. An analysis of three such estates, Marzahn in Berlin, Petržalka in Bratislava and the Bijlmer in Amsterdam, reveals three different approaches that are closely linked to local conditions.



Brightly painted Plattenbau flats in Marzahn

Marzahn

With some 142,000 inhabitants, Marzahn is Berlin's largest Plattenbau housing estate.¹ Ownership of the dwellings in Marzahn is currently shared among eight housing corporations. The largest, WBG Marzahn, owns 30,000 dwellings. There are also six cooperative housing corporations and since recently a few commercial landlords. The district was built between 1976 and 1987. In the GDR's day Marzahn boasted a highly differentiated population with labourers and professors living next door to one another. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification Marzahn suffered a severe loss of image. The introduction of the capitalist system brought about big

differences in income and prospects among the once equal inhabitants of the district. The area's residential profile has since changed dramatically. Many former residents have departed for the better suburbs of Berlin or for other parts of the country in search of work. In addition, the district attracts a lot of migrants from other post-communist countries. The strong social network that fostered cohesion in the district under the GDR also disappeared with reunification. Like many urban areas in eastern Germany, Marzahn has to contend with shrinkage. The level of vacancy currently stands at around 21 per cent.

Yet the district has also benefited from reunification. A smooth-running government machine, adequate financial resources and virtually unchanged property ownership structures allow for radical renovation. In the early 1990s rigorous demolition was considered. Social acceptance of the estates by east Germans and satisfaction among residents were important arguments for finally deciding to renovate rather than demolish. An integrated planning approach was advocated: instead of producing one big masterplan for the whole of Marzahn or introducing a static principle for treating the entire district in the same way, the planners opted for a dynamic process capable of rectifying mistakes and assimilating new developments. Spatial, cultural, social, economic and political developments reinforce one another. From 1991 to 1998 the various housing corporations invested some DM 24 m. in the renovation of 42,308 of the 58,600 Plattenbau dwellings.

The renovation plans give little or no consideration to dwelling typology or to an aspect that is regarded as problematical in the Netherlands, the anonymous relation between buildings and their surroundings. Instead, renovation is restricted to facade insulation, the



Colour on facades is intended to reduce the large-scale effect of Marzahn

application of colour to the facades, improved building services and the possible installation of new balconies. In other words, the existing building typology is being upgraded to contemporary standards. Unlike in the Netherlands, differentiation of dwelling typology occurs on a very small scale and takes the existing structure as its starting point: in a few places flats are knocked together to form maisonettes, penthouses are made on the top floor, terraced blocks are created by partially demolishing the Plattenbau structure, new towers are built in the open corners between the flats. Visual differentiation is a major theme but does not broach the question of typology. Colour and differentiation in building height are used in an attempt to break the anonymity of Marzahn. Using this technique of 'pullover anziehen' (putting on a pullover), the negative image of Plattenbau in the former GDR is being glossed over.

In Marzahn a top-down approach is being deployed to strengthen the quality and character of the garden city. Initiatives from below do not get much of a look-in. Residents' plans for the reuse of empty school buildings run up against inflexible German regulations that

confront budding entrepreneurs with huge start-up costs. How will Marzahn develop in the future? Will it, too, eventually discover that the image of the collective residential block has too little to offer a Berlin housing market faced with a declining population? Will strict German regulations be softened or perhaps even abandoned in order to allow the necessary socio-economic impulses to blossom?

Petržalka

Bratislava was the third city of Czechoslovakia, after Prague and Brno. Now it is the capital of a new European nation, Slovakia. In the mid 1970s work commenced on a large-scale, new district on the south bank of the Danube, opposite the old city. It was the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream of many people: to see Bratislava grow into a Danube metropolis like Vienna and Budapest. The original design for the district, by J. Chovanec of St. Talas Stavo project in Bratislava, envisaged 50,000 dwellings for 150,000 inhabitants on a site covering approximately 3,000 hectares, about half of which was to be occupied by housing. Central city amenities were planned for the

north side of the district beside the river, around a central public transport axis. On the east side, between the housing and the Danube, there was space for recreation. Originally no fewer than five bridges were to have linked Petržalka with the northern part of the city. Employment opportunities for the many residents of the new district were located on the west side of Petržalka. An important premise of the original design was a canal that would control the water level of the Danube and so prevent flooding in Petržalka. However, until 1992 Petržalka continued to suffer from flooding; partly because of this it was decided use the plinths for storerooms rather than dwellings. Since

1992 the water level in the Danube has been regulated by the Gabčíkovo water works and flooding is a thing of the past.

Soon after the political system change, the bulk of the dwellings were sold off very cheaply to the sitting tenants. One problem is the lack of representative bodies. Home-owners' associations, housing corporations or tenants' associations are unknown; between state and individual there yawns a huge gulf. Individual owners have insufficient financial resources to pay for renovation. Communal areas like the staircases, plinths and ground surface suffer greatly under privatization. The state no longer feels responsible and individual home owners



Petržalka, residents' association has carried out sporadic maintenance of the flats

The transformation of collective housing estates

are insufficiently organized to assume responsibility for management. There is consequently no trace of a planned (top-down) transformation as in Marzahn; in Petržalka the only changes are bottom-up ones.

Unlike Marzahn, however, Petržalka has few social problems; unemployment is very low (2.3%) compared with the national average (15%) and vacancy rates are minimal. The district has now reached a population of 200,000, making it the largest residential area in Bratislava. Owing to a lack of money, the originally planned amenities, which were based on a population of 130,000, never materialized. However, more apartment buildings have since been built and occupied, so that there is now a sufficiently large population to support the conversion of the ground-floor storerooms into shops, workplaces and other amenities. Many residents are seizing this opportunity and in so doing contributing to the informal and unplanned transformation of Petržalka which is acquiring a surprisingly urban character in the process. Conceived as a garden city, Petržalka has grown in an almost classic way into a true organic city.

The question is, of course, what the future holds for Petržalka. Will the apartment owners be able to organize themselves sufficiently to undertake the necessary maintenance? Will formal planning ultimately cause the bottom-up initiatives to disappear or will competition from the edge-of-town shopping malls prove to be the kiss of death for Petržalka's organic urbanity?

Bijlmermeer

Bijlmermeer is one of the most radical urban development experiments in the Netherlands. The original, never fully realized, plan by architect Siegfried Nassuth and the Amsterdam planning department, was for 40,000 dwellings within an orthogonal system of raised motorways (drives). The dwellings were for the most part contained in nine-storey, honeycomb-shaped apartment blocks on top of a double-height plinth, situated in a green 'park' criss-crossed by footpaths and cyclepaths. Parking was in communal car parks that doubled as raised internal streets connecting the drives to the flats. Long before the last dwelling had been completed, the large-scale and anonymous architecture and design of Bijlmermeer had become a subject of controversy.

Jannie Vinke



In Petržalka residents have set up a lot of small businesses in the plinths of the Plattenbau flats



The double-height plinth of the Petrzalka Plattenbau is capable of accommodating a wide range of functions



New low-rise dwellings in the Bijlmer; in the background high-rise from the early years

In addition to its spatial problems, Bijlmermeer has had to contend with huge social problems. The middle classes for whom it was originally built stayed away. The 'Bijlmer', as it is popularly known, has always acted as a first port of call for newcomers to Amsterdam and has consequently always housed a lot of migrants, with all the problems that entails. In 1994 almost half the population (45.5%) was unemployed. At the beginning of the 1990s some 70% of the high-rise residents were born outside the Netherlands. The great diversity of resident groups, many of whom came directly from a different culture to live in the Bijlmer, gives rise to tensions. Residential mobility is extremely high so that there is little social cohesion.

Since the early 1980s, the district has been the subject of almost continuous and increasingly rigorous tinkering. It began with the addition of colour, the demolition of part of the internal streets and the splitting up of dwellings. The first plans by Projectbureau Vernieuwing Bijlmermeer date from the early 1990s and envisaged replacing 23% of the high-rise flats with low-rise.² In the revised plans of 2002, that percentage had risen to 52%.

The Bijlmermeer redevelopment operation is exemplary for the Dutch suspicion of large-scale collective housing typologies. The high demolition rate is prompted by the poor image enjoyed by high-rise and changing views on housing differentiation. The government's retreat from the provision of housing leaves more scope for the private sector and it is mainly interested in the marketability of the dwellings.

Redevelopment started on a neighbourhood by neighbourhood basis. It was only at a later stage, in a masterplan drawn up by Ashok Bhalotra (Kuiper Compagnons), that an attempt was made to link up the different sub-areas. This approach reflects the fear of the kind of blueprint planning that produced the original Bijlmer. Unlike a masterplan for the whole district, the neighbourhood approach guarantees rapid results and is also capable of responding to changing opinions during a planning process that can easily take ten years or more. The upshot is that the overall concept of the Bijlmer has been replaced by a loose collage of different views and reactions to them. This attacks the essence of the spatial layout, turning it into a mishmash of the classic garden city with functional zoning, the Berlagian city

Jannie Vinke

of avenues and urban blocks, and the modern house-garden-car suburb. In the Ganzehoeft project area the Bijlmerdreef is being turned into a classic urban street flanked by city blocks, a solution that is presented as the answer to the Bijlmer's problems. In the F neighbourhood the planners have responded to the large number of foreign-born Bijlmer residents by introducing a 'compound' of the type found in traditional Ghanaian settlements.

While the redevelopment of Bijlmermeer may have turned its back on the original visionary masterplan, it is still a case of top-down planning. This occurs at two levels: that of the autonomous project areas each with their own spatial plan and approach, and that of the masterplan that links everything together again. In the early 1990s, the Bijlmer witnessed countless bottom-up initiatives, such as the many semi-legal businesses conducted in the largely empty car parks, or illegal child-minding in various apartments, organized by working single mothers. A number of these initiatives have since been formalized by converting the car parks to multi-occupancy buildings, others have disappeared completely because they were unable to survive outside the informal circuit.

Significance

Marzahn and Petrzalka are two extreme examples of districts undergoing a quite different transformation than we are familiar with in the Netherlands. The Marzahn example is interesting because of its non-stigmatizing nature. In the Netherlands the mass replacement of flats by one-family dwellings reinforces the negative image of the flats. In Marzahn everything is being done to give high-rise living a positive image by retaining this form of living in its essentials and improving it. It is a missed opportunity that so little is done to give collective housing new impetus in the redevelopment of post-war housing estates in the Netherlands. The one-sidedness of the housing stock in these areas is counteracted with a new form of one-sidedness. There is every likelihood that in thirty years' time, when the greying of the population peaks, we will find ourselves replacing the huge numbers of low-rise dwellings currently being built throughout the Netherlands with high-rise apartment buildings for the elderly.

Petrzalka is interesting because it demonstrates the power of bottom-up urbanization. The Dutch tendency towards over-regulation and over-planning crushes every form of private initiative, yet these very initiatives can play a vital role in improving the socio-economic position of the post-war housing estates. Informal initiatives of the kind seen in Petrzalka were still in evidence in Bijlmermeer in the early 1990s but have since disappeared completely. In the Dutch situation the importance of informal and low-threshold economic impulses and civic initiatives are not taken seriously enough. The Dutch government does try to cater to the enormous desire for civic freedom, but so far this has led only to contrived plans like 'wild wonen' (consumer-led housing construction) where it is once again the developer who pockets the profits. A less inflexible attitude with respect to regulation and a longer-term vision with regard to costs and revenues would allow greater scope for temporary and informal initiatives in the post-war districts of the Netherlands and add an extra dimension to the spatial, social, economic and management phenomenon of urban renewal.

1 In 1992 Marzahn still had 164,907 inhabitants; by 1998 this had dropped to 142,000, a decline of 14%. By way of comparison: the population of the city of Berlin declined by 3% in the same period.

2 In Projectbureau Vernieuwing Bijlmermeer the Nieuw Amsterdam housing corporation, Stadsdeel Zuidoost and the City of Amsterdam are collaborating on an integrated approach to the problems in Bijlmermeer.

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Perimeter blocks and Plattenbau The spatial rendering of socialist ideas

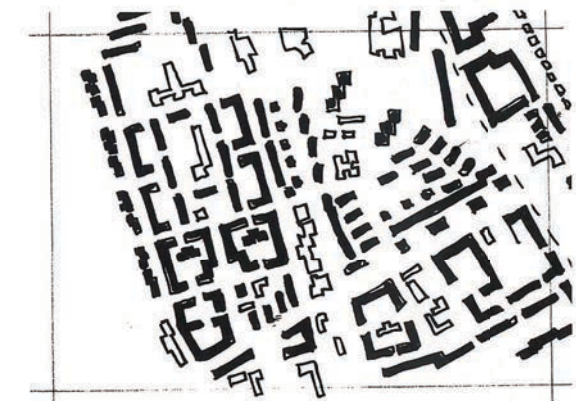
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For a good comparison of post-war housing estates in Central and Eastern Europe, a study of floor plans, subdivision principles and dwelling types is indispensable. These give insight into the precise consequences of socialist ideals of habitation. The accompanying drawings, based on an analysis of city maps and floor plans, show the spatial composition of several illustrative residential areas and prototypical subdivisions at different levels of scale. Particular attention has been paid to the structure of the district (organization of traffic, apartment buildings, greenery and amenities), the structure of the housing block (type of access and collective space) and the organization of the individual dwelling (orientation, size).

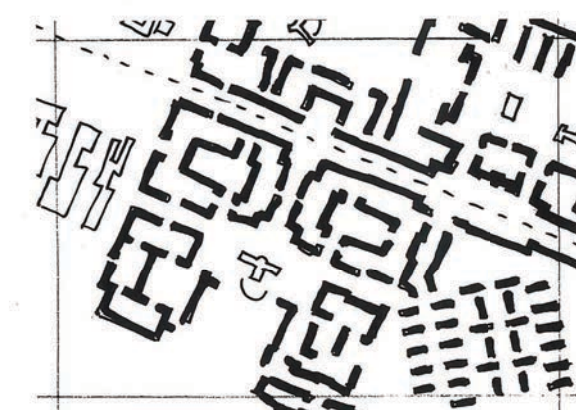
In the mass housing of the post-war period, two subdivision types were used: perimeter blocks with a central courtyard (Wohnkomplex) and open rows (Plattenbau). The first is typical of the socialist-realist period of the early 1950s, the second of industrialized modernism from 1954 onwards.

The basis of the socialist city is the housing estate. It constitutes the smallest planning unit and in addition to dwellings it provides space for all the necessary amenities of daily life such as shops, schools and recreation. A typical feature of the early socialist housing estate was the courtyard. Courtyards belong to the ideal of the 'closed' city composed according to classical urban design principles of courtyards, boulevards and squares. The individual dwelling is subordinated to a grand monumentality. The emphasis lies on the public, collective life that is supported with a wealth of amenities located mainly in the residential and shopping streets between the estates. These simultaneously defining and linking elements were elaborated as impressive spatial compositions. The housing estates of the early 1950s

Dunaújváros, Hungary 1950 onwards



Poruba, Ostrava, Czech Republic 1950 onwards



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