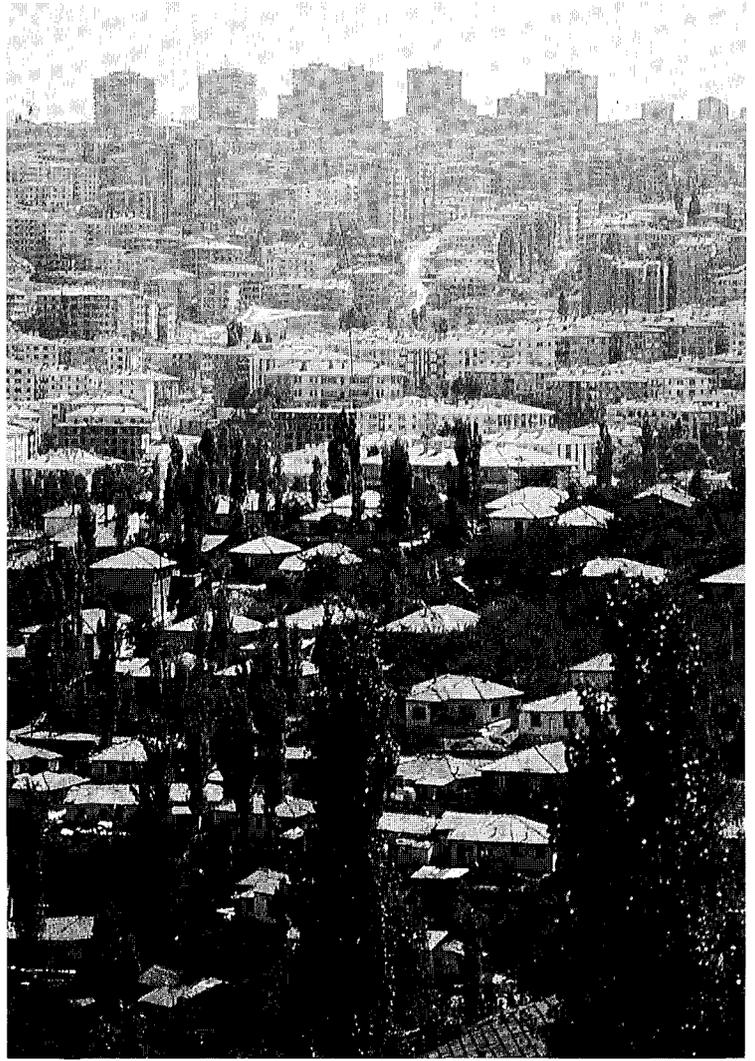


The Architecture of Mass Housing

Suba Özkan



Juxtaposition of three modes of housing production on the outskirts of Ankara. Informal housing (gekekondus), entrepreneur developments and large-scale developments in the foreground, middle and background respectively.

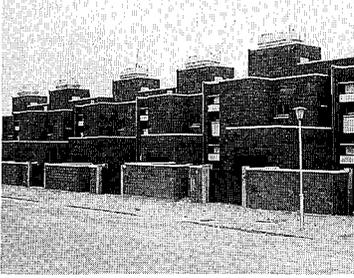


The Singapore Housing and Development Board has been successful in providing public housing

Introduction

In Muslim countries, most large cities are experiencing urbanisation problems that are similar to those found in the rest of the developing world, where townscapes are disfigured as a result of rapid and uncontrolled growth, primarily due to a mass rural exodus. We therefore witness the co-existence of a variety of housing production modes, a phenomenon worthy of closer examination. The expansion of informal settlements on the fringes of important urban centres has been discussed by Mona Serageldin. This paper will focus on the architecture of mass housing in its more organised and, above all, institutionalised expressions. This subject could be approached from different angles, ranging from the study of income groups and population densities to construction techniques and climatic zones. However, the present analysis will distinguish three main phases in the process of housing supply: decision making, generating capital and organising construction. These will in turn be viewed through three different perspectives, namely building initiatives arising respectively from the public and private sectors as well as cooperatives.

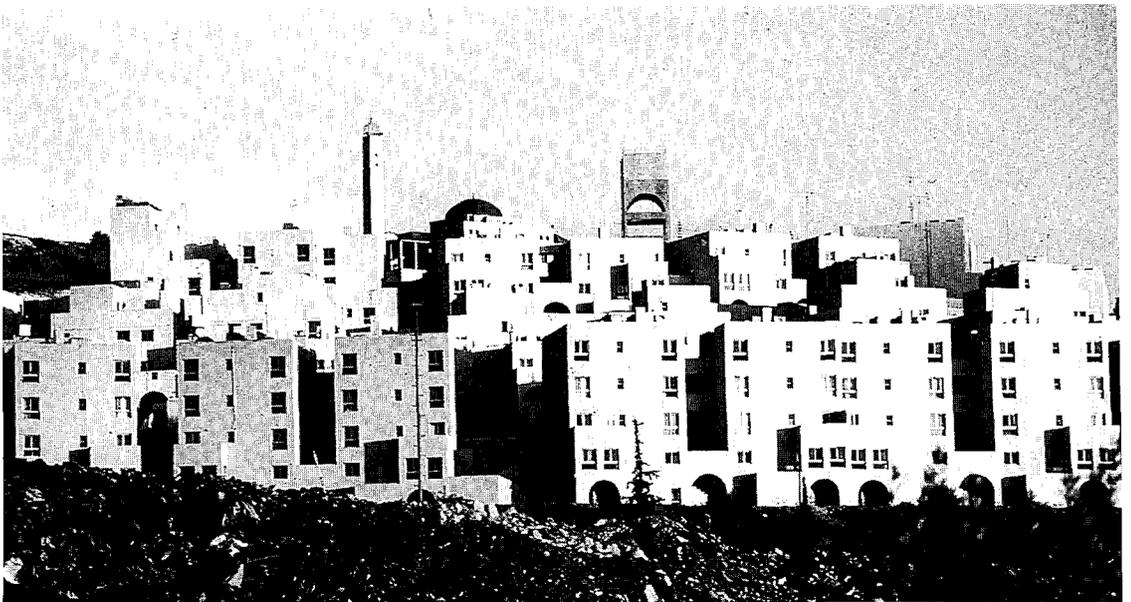
Public Housing Governments are still considered to be responsible for providing housing for the population at large. In actual fact, and for a number of reasons, they fall short of these expectations and even fail to effectively manage or control the various public bodies acting on their behalf. Notable exceptions are the Singapore Housing and Development Board and the “Million Houses Programme” launched in Sri Lanka; otherwise, in this domain, success is limited to relatively wealthy states such as Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries, where large amounts of money can be devoted to housing schemes. In these few rich countries, the provision of new housing by the respective governments is still mainly under the control of state bodies. There are nonetheless examples of governmental institutions handing over their prerogative to the private sector when the scheme on hand is technically feasible, and all the more so when it is profitable.

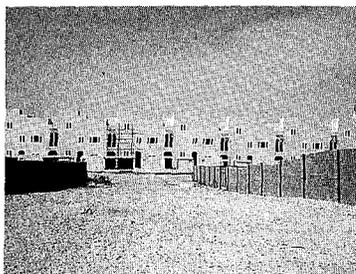


*Above. Public Housing project
Ain Beghze Development, Kuwait
Below. A public housing project in
Jordan. Cement Factory Housing Fuheis,
Jordan.*

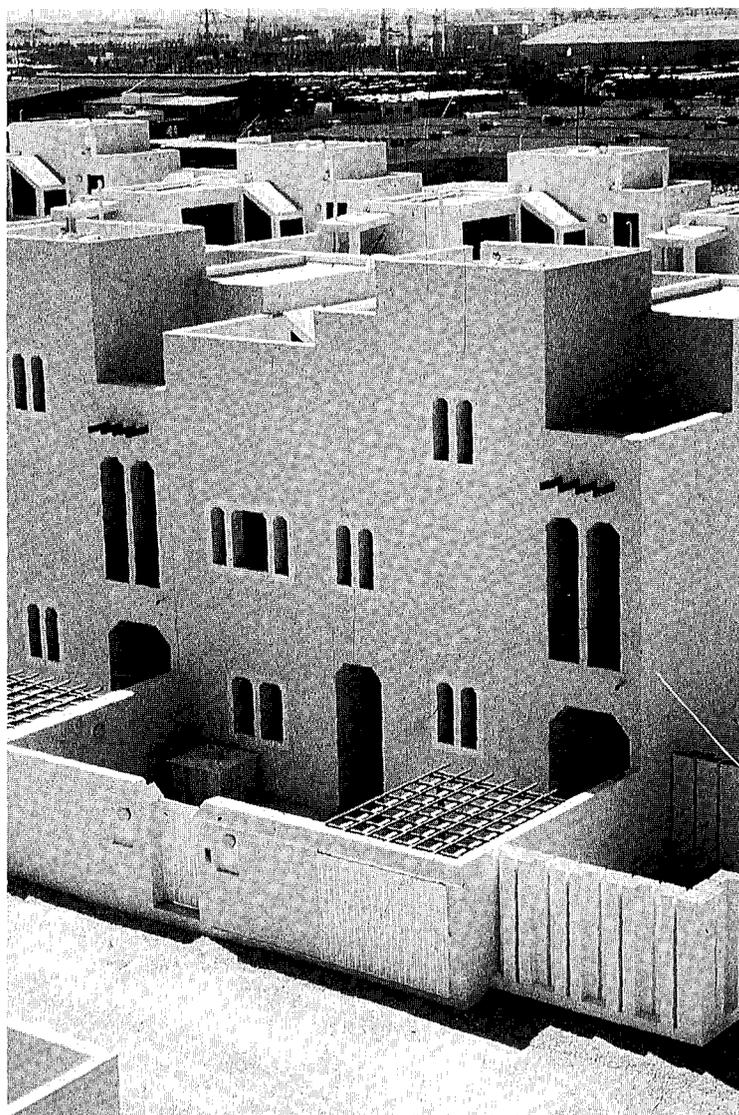
The initial step of land acquisition, and then obtaining a construction permit do not usually pose major problems to the public sector. Indeed, governments still own substantial amounts of land, and when appropriation is resorted to, it represents an administrative rather than a financial issue for state affiliated bodies. Likewise, the creation of infrastructure, an important obstacle for informal settlers, developers and cooperatives alike and an indispensable asset to secure the initial investment, can be more easily prompted by public sector bodies. These institutions usually have a say in defining priorities of basic services wherever it is politically desirable.

Governmental approaches to housing issues are expressed in quantitative terms based on the family unit. In most instances, living conditions and the quality of life are either overlooked or not expressly stated as priorities. The general policies embarked upon often seek to generate as many housing units in a short a time as possible. Architectural design is therefore reduced to a rudimentary exercise, and the construction technology to be used as well as the contracting procedure to make it available become determining factors. It ensures that the entire design process is defined by the choice of a particular technology, and





Above and right: Naiga Housing Complex, Doha, Qatar. The Gulf countries have achieved some success in public housing. Large amounts of money can be devoted to housing schemes.



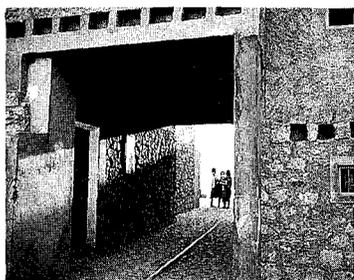
the result is bound to reflect only the basic performance of that technology. Exploring the possibilities of a given technology in a creative way with a view to improving living environments is systematically avoided as it implies taking risks — be they of a social, economic or cultural nature — a situation not readily ventured into by decision makers because of the increased responsibilities involved.

However complex the decision making mechanism might be, it is the power structure which ultimately determines the selection of technologies. In most cases, there is undoubtedly a great deal of goodwill to provide housing using the quickest possible means. Centrally planned economies can easily introduce innovative techniques, regardless of their social or cultural relevance; this often results in a built-up environment made up of identical parts assembled on a production line.

On the other hand, some governments are politically pressured to employ local expertise and materials and cannot indicate their preference as to the technology used, for fear of depriving local companies of contracting opportunities. Built with locally available techniques and know-how, the finished constructions are often of poor quality. In both instances, the outcome of over-simplified designs is devoid of any societal meaning and reduced to the horizontal and vertical movements of cranes lifting prefabricated blocks.

State involvement in the expansion of existing housing stocks is usually meant to provide dwellings for social groups that cannot afford prevailing market prices. However, due to a discrepancy between supply and demand, the objectives stated at the outset are often re-defined and, in most situations, these accommodations are allocated to financially and professionally more privileged layers of society.

Politicians and decision makers often conceive of mass housing as 4-5 storey high walk-up apartment blocks which eschew the use of heavy structural systems and are easy to maintain, because of the unsophisticated building parts and materials used in their construction. Furthermore, these solutions do not achieve population densities greater than any other alternative, be they formal or informal settlements.



*Above and below: Rural Housing
Sidi Abbas Housing, Ghardena,
Algeria.*

Government lead initiatives are usually triggered off by one of a combination of the following factors:

- To control urban growth, housing compounds are built on the fringes of cities, or take the form of satellites, with a view to absorbing an ever increasing demand. By completion time, it becomes more profitable for governments to sell the units, or to accommodate their own employees in them. As a result, the initial target population is deprived of the new dwellings and continues to exert undue pressure on urban growth. Areas occupied by public sector housing soon become islands surrounded by informal settlements.
- State authorities are sometimes called upon to adopt emergency measures to cope with problems arising from natural disasters or mass movements of populations due to political causes. Such undertakings suffer from the rapidity of the decision making process, and there have even been instances when the beneficiary populations have refused to move into these new shelters.

Contrary to the overall failure of many government urban housing schemes, a relative degree of success characterises similar initiatives in the rural context, where the needs of the communities concerned are expressed more forcefully and can therefore not be overlooked.





Soyak Housing, Istanbul
A developer's initiative aimed at the economically privileged social strata.

Requirements for rural settlement projects are usually put forth in such a way as to involve the direct participation of architect-planners in the design of better defined social, economic and cultural entities.

To sum up, housing provided by the public sector, whether it involves rapidly assembled and foreign, or slowly produced and local technology, is geared towards quantitative rather than qualitative results — two criteria which are not *a priori* mutually exclusive — in total disregard of societal needs. This is why questions pertaining to decision making, architectural expertise and building technologies deserve a more in-depth and thorough examination in order to re-evaluate the importance of cultural and architectural concerns in the decision making processes.

Private Sector Housing Most Muslim countries accord private companies the right to participate in building activities. These range from the construction of a simple block on a plot duly registered in a city master-plan to developments of virgin land extending beyond the outer limits of urban centres into “new territories”. Although not a widespread phenomenon, high-rise, clandestine constructions on the peripheries of towns have been built in total disregard of any legal framework or technical control. Examples can be found in capital cities such as Ankara and Cairo. This points to a logistic vacuum in the enforcement of law and, more dangerously, threatens the inhabitants’ safety, as only a bare minimum of technical standards and precautions are taken in the construction of such structures. These cheaper flats are put on the market by contractors determined to make maximum profits.

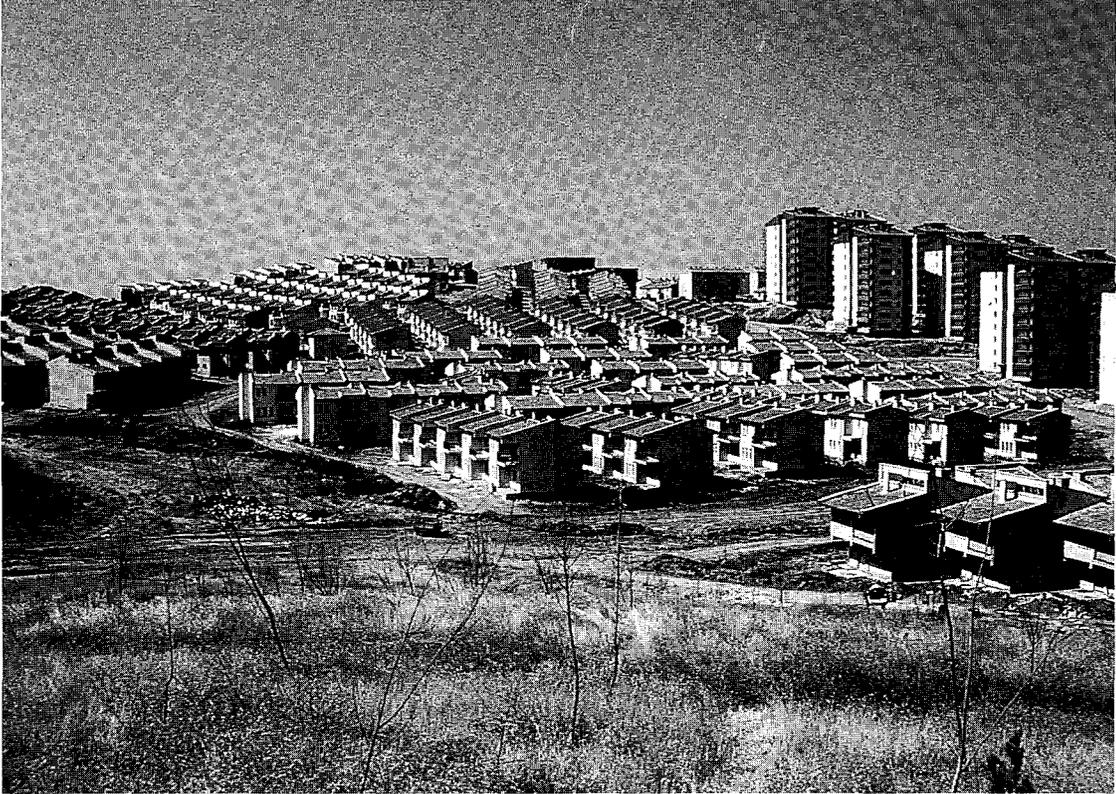
When erected on designated and serviced urban plots, these new projects are not significant in terms of cultural or architectural value, as the developer’s ultimate goal is to achieve the quickest and the greatest possible returns for their investments and efforts. This implies stretching the limits of building codes to a maximum and creating as many units as possible within the permitted building volumes. Therefore, the end-products do not depart from differently-sized, ordinary

blocks executed in a tedious and dreary architectural style. In such exercise, architects have to implement and comply with a given set of regulations, the expectations of the clients and prospective inhabitants are not given much consideration. Unfortunately, societal concerns cannot reform building codes beyond air rights, already designed to allow the largest dimensions and recesses in all directions.

Contrary to this when building schemes are undertaken within cities, where returns are based on high land value, only large companies can afford the development of virgin plots. Indeed, the acquisition of stretches of land with little or no infrastructure requires important capital resources, preferably coupled with political influence. These operations yield high profits, because lower land prices minimise the initial dead investment and the introduction of modern technologies shortens construction periods. Again, this market targets the economically privileged social strata. In these ventures, the decision mechanism aims at making the prospective occupants' expectations, hopes and even dreams economically and technically feasible. Hence the necessity of a considerable architectural input to create built-up environments reflecting

Developer's initiatives reflecting prevailing lifestyles and demand Assif Housing, Marrakesh, Morocco.





*Top and above. Cooperative Housing
Batikent, Ankara.
Right: Cooperative Housing
Dar Lamane Housing, Casablanca*



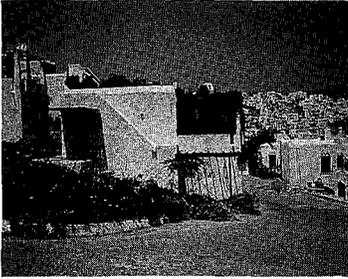
prevailing lifestyles. On these premises, developers can argue that they best cater for an existing demand.

Only one factor would direct such initiatives to serve economically less privileged groups: a market saturation affecting the higher-income levels of society; naturally, such situations are quite unlikely to occur. Otherwise, it takes the intervention of the public sector, usually in the form of subsidies and presented through the intermediary of cooperative societies offering entrepreneurs a participation as contractors, not as developers.

Cooperative Housing Housing supplied through cooperatives has proven to be the most effective and socially relevant way to generate dwelling units. Cooperative enterprises organise the demand and combine the economic means of small groups, in order to increase the negotiating power of individuals and reduce the final cost by supplying for many. This type of initiative involves projects ranging from the construction of 15-30 dwelling units to the creation of new satellite settlements. The smaller schemes are generally carried out by building companies, and the cooperatives are entrusted with raising and distributing the necessary funds. Such projects do not fall within the scope of a study on "mass housing".

Large scale cooperative projects are widely supported by the public sector, as they represent an effort to tackle housing problems, and financing institutions offer them favourable loan opportunities. The first and crucial step is the acquisition of some land which will act as a guarantee to raise a construction loan. Given that serviced sites within an urban context are both scarce and expensive and that the development of new areas without basic infrastructure is equally costly, most cooperatives fail to secure this first investment. Furthermore, as they owe their economic power to the savings of individuals, accumulating enough initial capital is always a much longer process than is foreseen at first; increasing land prices and inflation are additional discouraging factors.

However, once cooperatives own some land, negotiations to obtain construction credits to provide the necessary infrastruc-



*Second home built by a Cooperative
Aktur Bodrum, Turkey*

ture can start. The latter process, as it normally involves the participation of the public sector, is of a more political nature. On the other hand, building credits, mostly allocated against a mortgage, can only be handled by registered construction firms on the basis of contracts approved by the authorities. The issue of the control of funds earmarked for the cooperatives is usually resolved by giving contractors holding rights, while the cooperatives retain financial control in compliance with the contracting documents.

This implies that the architectural studies produced at the outset to obtain credits become the binding documents determining the shape of the structures to be built. Unfortunately, the quality of architectural input often remains minimal at this stage, as these projects are mostly conceived of as legal documents. There are nonetheless examples of a close cooperation between consulting architects and cooperative members which result — as might be expected — in successful realisations, at least in terms of the harmony achieved between the communities and their environment. It nevertheless remains a fact that numerous poor quality — and very seldom innovative — constructions are built in this way; this points to a necessity to seriously re-think the architectural involvement in such projects.

Interestingly, similar initiatives are used to cater for the demand for secondary residences and holiday homes, obviously involving an economically strong strata of society. The architectural quality displayed in these schemes is far greater and this cannot be explained by the economics of these projects only. It would seem that more time given to the decision making process as well as better defined expectations regarding holiday or retirement environments contribute to their greater success. Architects can consequently create buildings well adapted to a non-urban context both in terms of volumes/shapes and construction materials. However, such a discrepancy in the architectural quality seen in these two modes of housing — urban versus secondary homes — built through similar cooperative organisations is a curious phenomenon that certainly deserves further study.