

SOCIAL HOUSING

The construction of contemporary hungarian social housing

Thesis summary

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„...Before the changes most apartment buildings were commissioned and financed by the state, while over the past fifteen years the ownership structure of residential estates has been completely restructured. State owned apartment buildings have been privatized and new ones were built using private capital.

It's as if society had forgotten about its poor. It's the first time when we had to face questions like who's going to receive these apartments, what will the building's social makeup be like. We didn't really have the opportunity to prepare ourselves for it, and the buildings probably carry the marks of this unpreparedness.

...Most of the apartments are very small which only qualifies a certain number of the needy to live in them. Poverty in itself is no basis for forming a community. A building needs to communicate with its surroundings, not exist independently of it. It should not be a ghetto within its environment, the place where poor people live, but the building should be even a bit better than its surroundings, because it could give people otherwise living in a very difficult situation a type of dignity. Even poverty can be experienced a little differently in an aesthetically formulated building. In this fast-changing world of ours we have to pay attention to our environment, our values, and this an important part of architecture, and a big responsibility, because architecture is probably the best medium for expressing constancy and lasting values within a changing, unsure, and mobile world”

Margit PELENYI¹

¹ 15 years of transit – exhibition (2004)
www.tranzit.epiteszforum.hu/en/projekt/08/8.html

ABSTRACT

There is a lack of a housing system based on common social responsibility in Hungary. Attempts to create broader social housing were made in the wake of the regime change, but in the absence of tangible social support, no extended, comprehensive system has been established. Since the small number of isolated social housing projects seeing completion never reached the critical mass required, most social housing is provided through the existing pool of municipal housing stock, most of which is antiquated.

Recent events, the economic crisis, the collapse of housing mortgages, the rise in real estate prices and rent all point to the social necessity of this branch of the housing sector.

The aim of the present research is to map the architecturally relevant examples of the social and municipal rental housing stock built after the regime change, to examine the background, historical origins, and social embeddedness of the evolution of domestic social housing. Furthermore, the aim was to collect experiences regarding the design, construction, maintenance and use which could not previously be gathered as the developments concerned had still been relatively recent.

Based on the experiences thus collected, structured and evaluated, social housing problems can be more efficiently addressed in the future by specifically architectural means.

The present work is based on the following theses:

Thesis I: A social housing unit is an apartment that is part of a comprehensive subsidized housing system.

Thesis II: A social housing unit is an apartment that is part of a comprehensive subsidized housing system.

Thesis III: The construction of social housing is a particular tool in a wider set of elements providing for housing.

Thesis IV: The conscious choice of location, scale, housing composition, and complementary services of a social housing estate fundamentally determines the long-term sustainability of the intervention.

Thesis V: The guiding objective of designing social rental units is to achieve clarity of architecture through the complex interaction of efficient space, material, and energy use.

Thesis VI: The construction of social housing does not end with the creation of the physical environment, as the 'soft' elements that follow are an integral part of the process.

THESIS I – THE CONCEPT OF A SOCIAL HOUSING UNIT

A social housing unit is an apartment that is part of a comprehensive subsidized housing system.

The concept of a social housing unit represents different housing conditions in different countries, closely linked with the social, housing, economy, traditions and climate of the country.

In the Hungarian context, the concept of a social housing unit has not been precisely defined.

Based on international examples and historical antecedents along with contemporary experiences, the architectural concept of a social housing unit in Hungary can be defined as follows:

A rental apartment that is financed on the grounds of social responsibility that provides adequate and affordable housing as part of a comprehensive system based on the principle of need.

The definition entails six conditions, the joint fulfillment of which constitutes social housing in the Hungarian context.

120 apartments social housing in Pécs (architect: Margit PELENYI)



fotó: PESTI András / photo: András PESTI

THESIS II - TOOL

The construction of social housing is a particular tool in a wider set of elements providing for housing.

Depending on property prices, rental rates, and geographical location, the construction of social housing primarily addresses urban housing problems.

There is a divergence of views on the need for social housing and on the extent to which securing housing should be construed as the responsibility of society in the 21st century. However, individual life situations may arise at any time when individuals are unable to assure the conditions for their own housing or for that of their families. This is when support by the community becomes necessary in a society based on solidarity.

Social housing estate on Orczy road, Budapest (architects: Péter BACH, Csaba MOLNÁR)



forrás: M Építész Iroda / source: M Architect

THESIS III – AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

The social housing system does not merely provide housing, but is intended to maintain the balance of society.

A social housing unit is not intended to cater for individual purposes but for those of the community; it does not provide property, but rather, a service. From a social point of view, the character of a social housing estate resembles a public institution more than it does a traditional residential building.

The construction of social housing and market-based investments are driven by different mechanisms. The purpose of market-driven housing construction is to serve the needs of the current solvent demand and realize the highest return. The aim of social housing construction is to provide housing for low-income social groups while ensuring affordable long-term maintenance of the rental apartments.

The social housing system must provide an extensive set of housing support tools in order to provide real benefits on a social scale. Failing this, the current system of limited dimensions will generate tensions due to the fact that participating in the system is more of a privilege than a generally available basic option. This controversial situation limits the social consensus required to generate support for the system.

Social housing estate in Práter street, Budapest (architects: Péter KIS, Csaba Valkai)



fotó: BATÁR Zsolt / photo: Zsolt BATÁR

THESIS IV - PROGRAMMING

The conscious choice of location, scale, housing composition, and complementary services of a social housing estate fundamentally determines the long-term sustainability of the intervention.

Efficiency and sensitivity constitute two conflicting sets of fundamental criteria defining the programming of a social housing estate. Finding the optimal balance between the two is one of the pillars of long-term sustainability.

The pursuit of efficiency bends the programming process towards constructing large-scale buildings with high numbers of small homes. This is basically the only aspect considered during the design of a large number of housing estates. However, the excessive pursuit of efficiency becomes counterproductive and too tight beyond a certain point, compromising long-term sustainability, and regenerating instead of resolving the housing problem.

Efficiency should not necessarily result from maximizing the scale and minimizing apartment size; rather, from smart technical and spatial solutions, the long-term maintenance of tenement houses and reduced operating costs.

Overall, the aim is to create a program, choose a scale and location that will ensure optimum housing conditions, thereby guaranteeing long-term sustainability.

*Social housing estate in Ambrus street, Budapest
(architects: János ROTH, Péter LASZTÓCZI, Balázs VIZER)*



forrás: Építészfórum / source: Építészfórum

THESIS V - ARCHITECTURAL-TECHNICAL COMPLEXITY

The guiding objective of designing social rental units is to achieve clarity of architecture through the complex interaction of efficient space, material, and energy use.

Due to the limited number of antecedents in Hungary, the design of each new building has involved a certain experimental character.

Despite the fact that minimizing construction costs is not a priority, all parameters of social housing are very tight. It is necessary to respond to contrary factors such as economical construction and operation, more compactness in the creation of space and mass, the maximum capacity of the building, and meeting the extreme demands arising from irregular use. Compliance with the complexity of these conditions will inevitably lead to an increase in construction costs above the average market level. The optimization of construction costs in international practice has resulted in the adoption of unconventional architectural and technical solutions, such as a unique, flexible spatial organization, efficient supporting and building structures, the use of prefabricated elements, and developing new structural element typologies.

Due to the limited number of domestic examples, there was no way for the Hungarian social housing construction to develop a unique architectural and technical toolkit. Failing this, individual building designs either displayed an experimental character or remained stuck at the general level of housing development as determined by market factors.

Passive house for 100 apartments (architect: ARCHIKON)



fotó: SZENTIRMAI Tamás / photo: Tamás SZENTIRMAI

THESIS VI – LIFE AFTER CONSTRUCTION

The construction of social housing does not end with the creation of the physical environment, as the 'soft' elements that follow are an integral part of the process.

Maintaining the social housing system requires a set of measures specifically characterizing these interventions, such as the selection of tenants, the coordination of moving in, and providing social work and supervision when necessary.

Having visited a major part of the social housing stock constructed after the regime change, and having talked to tenants, construction firms, estate managers and architects, it is possible to state that the domestic system provides quality and affordable housing and that tenants treat the units as their real homes as a result of legal guarantees. However, there are territorial differences in terms of quality, the social work following the construction phase and capacity.

From a social point of view, the image of a long-term sustainable model emerges, the further expansion of which would have many benefits. It could provide targeted assistance to the lower to lower-middle-class social classes currently lagging behind; it would not expose the most vulnerable to the whims of market processes, and through the complementary services provided, a significant part of social problems could be tackled in time.

Finally, in the field of metropolitan urban housing, local authorities can build on their existing experiences to come up with better-targeted solutions; they can build better quality through their advocacy capacity; and with their existing institutional background and non-profit economic model, they are able to operate the apartments at a lower cost than do the average market players. In the light of international experience, a sufficiently extensive community housing system can also exert an impact on market-based rentals with favorable housing conditions.

Social housing estate in József street, Budapest (architects: Zoltán SZÉCSI, László VÁNCZA)



fotó: BUJNOVSZKY Tamás / photo: Tamás BUJNOVSZKY

