

Pascal DE DECKER
Caroline NEWTON

At the fall of Utopia

Immediately after WW2 numerous large-scale housing estates began to spring up. More often than not they consisted of high-rises. Merely 50 years later a great number of these developments are in the process of demolition or are seriously undergoing restructuring. The Modernistic thoughts, inspired by the CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne) movement and Le Corbusier seem to have lost the appeal they once held. In this contribution we look into this evolution and more specifically, we focus on the misinterpretation of the importance

of the (symbolic) meaning of housing by the Modernist movement. A misjudgement, that eventually resulted in the speedy dismantling of these estates.

Keywords: meaning of housing, social housing estates, modernism, decay

“Many people dream of a better world: Howard, Wright and Le Corbusier went a step further and planned one” (Fishman, 1977: 3).

“The results were at best questionable at worst catastrophic” (Hall, 1988: 204).

1 Introduction

Marseille, May 2006: As we are approaching Le Corbusier’s modernistic masterpiece, the *Cité Radieuse*, a giant grey housing block on pilots (Figure 1), a nearby student was asked what pops into his head on viewing this impressive building. This young guy, coming from one of the most rural areas in Flanders, Belgium answers: *“It’s just like a battery cage.”* A day later, the students, strolling in front of us, suddenly stop and hesitated to walk any further in the direction of one of the social housing estates in the Northern Suburbs of the same French city, where charred façades and melted asphalt are the visible remnants of the violent clashes. But what has overwhelmed them even more was the sermon from the receptionist that morning in the hotel: She swore that the northern suburbs were far too dangerous to visit, and she emphasised that we should not go there.



Figure 1: Le Corbusier’s Unité d’habitation, Firmini (photo: Caroline Newton).

During the WW2, Marseille was largely destroyed, both by the Germans and the allied forces, and not so long after, the city additionally was confronted with a serious influx of immigrants, creating immense housing needs. Prompted by the then Socialist Mayor, Gaston Deffere, large social housing estates, the so-called HLMs^[1], were built in the Northern suburbs.

What seemed like good solutions in the aftermath of WW2 often became dystopias. Hoefnagels (1974), a Dutch criminologist, argued – even during the 70’s – that the increase of

criminal behaviour amongst the youngsters in the new high-rise estate of Ommoord, at the edge of Rotterdam, is a (*direct*) consequence of the lack of urban and architectural quality. He even advised to set the young criminals free on the bases of ‘architectural and planological unaccountability and alienating urbanism.’ Years later, Alice Coleman (1985) – who would later become an advisor to Margaret Thatcher – brought the Modernist Utopia to trial and, inspired by Jane Jacobs (1961) and Oscar Newman (1973) Utopia was sentenced. Despite the fact that the argumentations of these authors are rather pseudo-science (Fishman, 1977; De Decker, 1987), we see that today the Western world is seriously ‘deconstructing’ its high-rise estates. Places like the Bijlmer in the Netherlands, Marzahn in Berlin, La Duchère in Lyon and even Ireland’s only estate Ballymun in Dublin, are being partly or even completely demolished (Figure 2). Characterised by abandoned and unoccupied flats, decline, criminality, clashes with the police, marginalisation and alienation; characterised by poor scores on social indicators: low income, unemployment, high numbers of school drop-outs, high percentages of single mothers, etc; and often ‘wrong’ at election times, either because of a low turnout or because of voting for rightwing nationalist parties.



Figure 2: High-rise estates under reconstruction (photo: Pascal De Decker and Caroline Newton).

Estates in Flanders such as the Luchtbal and Linkeroever in Antwerp or the Nieuw Gent in Ghent, are teaming with the 19th century belts of the cities in being the typical deprived neighbourhoods of today (Kesteloot and Meys, 2008). The quality of these estates was so appalling that Gabriëls, a former minister for housing stated that, he wouldn’t even want to house his rabbits in those flats (De Decker, 2005; De Decker et al., 2009).

2 Rise and fall

The high-rise estates, discussed above, were built, like numerous others, according to the concepts and ideas of people like Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier, and the entire CIAM (Congrès In-

ternational d'Architecture Moderne) movement around him, had a very noticeable impact on the ideas regarding housing in general, and social housing in particular. For Le Corbusier, a house was *une machine à habiter*, a housing machine, designed to do nothing more than, optimally, serve the function of a dwelling and nothing more. In 1929, the CIAM conference in Frankfurt – although itself dealing with the problems of the existing industrial cities – created the answers to what would become the enormous housing needs after WW2. Their *Wohnung für das Existenzminimum* was based on the concepts and ideas of the time, and anchored in a rational-utilitarian planning tradition. According to Gropius, it was going to be new accommodation for the new 'Städtische Industrie-Bevölkerung' (Gropius, 1962). On the scale of the city, the Modern movement argued against the chaotic 'growth' and for a planned approach, which should be guided by a puritan member of the technically skilled elite (Fishman, 1977; Bakker, 2008). Orderliness, the strict separation of functions and high-rises within large green and open areas open to the public, are amongst the core elements of the modernistic doctrine.

After WW2, the modernistic approach became a much used solution (Hall, 1988; Murie et al., 2003; Power, 1997) which in retrospect, looked like the right solution at the right moment. With it came a theory on the 'right way of living' and 'the good city', creating the expectation that through planning, urban design and architecture it was possible to design *the new man* and realise *a social transformation* (Fitting, 2002). These stories, this utopia, helped leaders to legitimise the large scale projects they envisaged. Additionally, the new materials and construction techniques allowed for speedy construction and in vast quantities, enabling a fast response to the large housing needs after the war. Numerous cities had suffered because of the war, the quality of the old city neighbourhoods was inferior and shantytowns were suddenly appearing around some of the cities (e.g. in France). Additional pressure on the housing market was created by the double in-stream of migrants: both from rural areas as well as from the colonies where people were moving to the cities. In the first instance it needs to be acknowledged that the housing conditions (with regard to the quality of the house) of those entering the new estates was preferable to their previous one, as the buildings were technically better and the flats were more advanced when it came to equipment.

But, all 'good things' come to an end! By 1959, Van Eyck had already noted that this minimum form of housing is a 'new kind of shack' and that '*die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum*' has become the manual for the housing administrator or entrepreneur with the sole interest in output (Van Eyck, 1959). Yet this didn't prevent the further expansion of the CIAM's ideas. One of the most infamous was the Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis,



Figure 3: Pruitt-Igoe from dream to destruction (source: Internet 1).

Missouri, which was constructed during the fifties and had already been demolished by 1972 (Figure 3). Although there is proof that there were significant design flaws, there is still an argument that the 'Architecture' was not to blame. It can be argued that the architecture was not the only thing that went wrong at Pruitt-Igoe, as is the case at many other developments, but it was certainly an important factor. Charles Jencks (1977) stated that the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe marked the end of high-modernism.

From the middle of the 80's models have been developed, models that try to provide an understanding of why and how these estates have languished at a progressively faster pace (e.g. Murie et al., 2003; Power, 1997; Priemus and Prak, 1985; Turkington et al., 2004). From these a complex amalgam of factors emerged. Some discuss the malfunctioning of the project *an sich*: the elevators break down regularly, thus the tenants have to use the stairs carrying their shopping. There are problems with the waste disposal systems, encouraging people to throw their stuff out of the windows. Some flats are hard to allow access into; it is even difficult to bring in large packages of groceries. Most of the high-rises have bad acoustics, which makes them hardly quiet, not even when children are in bed. High-rises are not the best place to grow up (Hall, 1988; Page, 1994). Another factor is the often peripheral location of the estates; they are on the fringes of cities, far from any amenities and opportunities. More often than not these estates were filled with people from neighbourhoods in the city's core, who then had to commute for years back to the centres, as job opportunities did not move with them to the city's edges. But also schooling, shopping and recreational options were underdeveloped, again making people move back into the urban centre. Still today, HLM places like La Duchère, Vaulx-en-Velin and Les Minguettes in Lyon, 'les quartiers Nords' in Marseille, or peripheral estates like Drumchapel or Easterhouse in Glasgow, are inadequately connected with efficient public transport systems within the centre of these cities.

Beyond all of these factors mentioned, the deterioration of these estates is especially affected by the changing societal context.

The modernist planners, with Le Corbusier as their 'numero uno', envisaged a *new society for a new man*, meaning the *final Utopia* ... perfect and finished in every detail (whatever that may be). But this was a complete misunderstanding of the precise nature of a society as an ever changing organism, a complete misinterpretation of the position of the planner, the architect as the 'philosopher-king' (Fishman, 1977). For Le Corbusier his Unité d'habitation was a 'vertical community' without any politics, he believed that his design would make people work and live together in an (ideal) community, re-modelling their relations into co-operative channels. His aversion for politics^[2] faded, the plan by itself was able to create harmony (Fishman, 1977), or using Le Corbusier's words:

The despot is not a man. It is the Plan. The correct, realistic, exact plan, the one that will provide your solution once the problem has been posited clearly, in its indispensable harmony. This plan has been drawn up well away from the frenzy in the mayor's office or the town hall, from the cries of the electorate or the laments of society's victims. It has been drawn up by serene and lucid minds. It has taken into account nothing but human truths /.../ It is a biological creation destined for human beings and capable of realization by modern techniques (Le Corbusier; quoted in: Scott, 1999: 112).

For Le Corbusier, the design of the house, or the city, reflects a pure aesthetic knowledge, known only to a select few, a belief based on the ideas of Plato and Schuré. Although it may appear to us that they are not grounded in reality, there are universal concepts that can only be grasped through theoretical and philosophical thinking, and only the initiated, 'les initiés' (Schuré, 1889) are capable of this. Le Corbusier believed that bringing the 'ordinary man' into contact with these aesthetics would 'enlighten' them. In 1930, he got the opportunity to build 130 houses in Pessac (Figures 4 and 5) to house labourers of a manufacturer. Yet, the harmonious use of volumes and colours wasn't understood by the inhabitants, and very soon their 'machines à habiter', were altered to better meet their specific needs. This illustrates the discrepancy between the thoughts of so-called experts, and the ideas of the people for whom the designs are actually intended.

Although modernist planners assured us they were building the societies of the future, what they were actually building stemmed from the past and apparently the good timing became a bad one. The changes in Western societies occurred almost simultaneously with the construction of numerous estates. The advantages of the welfare state were generalised: the combination of increasing productivity and the development of a social security system means that for most of the people prosperity increased spectacularly. An important consequence of this is that housing became more than a mere shelter, it became ac-

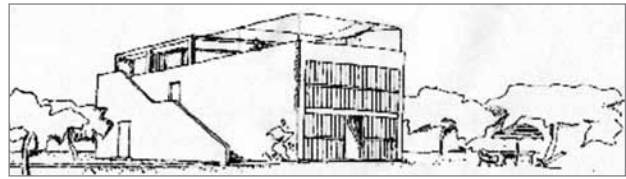


Figure 4: Perspective of the Citrohan project (1920) by Le Corbusier (source: Internet 1).



Figure 5: Pessac today – note the alterations made by the inhabitants (source: Internet 1).

ording to Kesteloot (1988) a consumption good, and more often than not local authorities, because of their promotion and subsidizing systems favouring home-ownership, created competition with the social housing sector (Wacquant, 1992).

The combination of an increase in income, government subsidies and a discourse that defines home-ownership as superior to rent (let alone social rent), increasingly stimulated households who could afford it, to leave the high-rise estates, which, as time went by, initiated a process of progressive marginalisation. The more households have the means to become homeowners, the more the estates attract people who have no other options left. Who wants to live in a dark and grey concrete tower, when you can live in a house with a garden? Housing in clean – read: grey and modernistic – remember Loos's *Ornament und Verbrechen* (Loos, 1908) – buildings has lost its status, it has sank on the housing ladder, even far beneath that of the often despicable private rental sector.

3 What needs to be understood then about living?

Even if the decline of modernist social housing is a consequence of a complex series of factors, varying from country to coun-

try, from city to city and from moment to moment, the impact of the reductionist thinking of the movement can, or should, never be underestimated. Following their belief in a make-able society, every citizen would be moulded in his proper housing form. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The majority of people don't want to spend their days in high-rise flats without an identity, they aspire to a freestanding villa, preferably in the countryside, or a stylish and elegant townhouse, or a luxurious farmhouse, housing models that have been present since the 19th century and have been promoted by governments for long periods of time. The modernists have gazed at the blank page with too much expectation and their design upon it – without being socially embedded – was doomed to failure ... except for the freestanding villa. The popular residential model would beat the modernistic one, whose failure has everything to do with a thorough misunderstanding of the meaning of housing.

With the rise of the welfare state and prosperity levels, housing needs were no longer evaluated as basic needs, because for most of us the need was answered. Today it is clear that a number of meanings are projected onto the mere physical structure of a house, the symbolic meaning has become predominant. As Giddens (1990) argued, people try to attain a certain standard of living, and particular lifestyles help them to establish an identity. The home is an object that reveals who someone is to the outside world, as well as telling us how people live and how well they are doing. The symbolic value of the house is strongly related to the notion of status (Bourdieu, 1984; Clapham, 2005), and aspects of a lifestyle are linked to Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital. Within a given society, people with a particular lifestyle will have acquired a certain status, thereby expressing their relative success. As such, people prefer something which reflects their individual identities, not an anonymous flat in a grey and monotone block.

Tuan (1975) quite accurately noticed that, behind their façades, modern buildings do not offer to their inhabitants any bodily and sensual pleasures or sensations of smell and touch. He argues that high-rise apartments are even worse, because the buildings' outlook make it impossible to detect individuals' homes therein. The impression exuded from such buildings is that of an undisguised marker of low-cost social housing. Additionally, the inhabitants of these dwellings are also able to accurately read the environments in which they live. We illustrate this by reproducing a quote from a Pruitt-Igoe tenant:

To a person who cannot afford the luxuries that a person can have, Pruitt-Igoe is what you might say was forced upon them. This is the last resort /.../ Yes, the environment is very bad. If a person could get outside I'm sure he wouldn't be here. If I could get on the outside /.../ I wouldn't be here either (Birmingham, 1999: 304).

Tenants on public housing estates see themselves as inferior, and as positioned precisely as a result of their specific 'status' as tenants in the public, social, housing sector (Clapham, 2005). The symbolic meanings attached to the home are of importance, since the house is a symbol of the Self (Mallet, 2004). For Wu (1993) the home is essential to the formation of one's identity, and he sees people's identities (the 'I') being constructed through their relationships with others, relationships which are initiated in the home: *"Home is where I both was born and am being continually born, within that womb called other people, in their being not me"* (ibid.: 195).

These are not new insights. Even during the 70's Rakoff (1977) stressed that housing is an important element in a society dominated by an individualised ideology, based on individual success(es). He follows Sennett and Cobb (1972) when he places housing at the heart of the tensions people experience in their striving to be a successful individual in a society, where the classical channels to achieve this success, such as work, labour and income, are not easily accessible. For e.g. migrant workers or lower employees, it is not easy or not possible to be successful. The individual house keeps up the appearance of being a possible solution. Ample people have the possibility to show their individuality in the results of their daily (routine) work, but there is a growing employment uncertainty, while control over the work done is diminishing. The ideology of individualism makes people believe that every individual is responsible for his own success or failure. When people encounter societal problems or difficulties, such as when they fail to be successful in their jobs or when job success is not possible, then, according to Rakoff (1977), they try to compensate this by exerting themselves to be *respectable* in other ways. As such, they try to comply with the generally accepted norms and values of a given society, such as acquiring their own home or moving to a higher class neighbourhood.

Rakoff's research showed that the mere material meaning of the house is less important than certain symbolical ones. These conclusions were reaffirmed in housing research in townships in Cape Town, South Africa (Newton, 2008a, 2008b):

1. The home is the place where parents raise their children with love and care; it is the place where norms and values are passed to the children (Altman and Werner, 1985; Clapham, 2005). It is the place where a significant part of a child's socialisation occurs. Accordingly, it is an important element in the reproduction of the social world. But it is also considered to be a safe haven, wherein nurturing and care are provided, making the house a home.
2. Through their home people can construct their identities and houses are used as a symbol of social status. Using the house in this way, one does not only try to find appraisal

from the people in the world around them but they are also evaluating their own position. The house becomes an indicator for their own success (or failure).

3. Giddens showed that in a post-modern society, people are losing their sense of purpose in life as well as their sense of belonging. He also stresses that a home can become a place wherein 'ontological security' can be realised. As such, the home reassures people that our social world is as it should be, and that our own identity is safely assured within it. In the privacy of the home, the inhabitants can rebuild their trust in the world, thereby securing their 'being-in-the-world' (Clapham, 2005; Dupuis and Thorns, 1998; Giddens, 1984, 1990).

However, within this reasoning, one final and crucial element is missing, which is an element that, according to Rakoff (1977) completes and underlies the earlier ones, namely ownership. His research revealed how people emphasise the necessity of home-ownership in order to realise the other meanings attached to the home, such as refuge, status, and security. This is true for both home-owners and those who rent property. Rakoff noticed how this notion of ownership was often talked about in terms of *freedom*, which could range from the *freedom to change things* to *freedom from the control of people in the outside world*. The private spaces in one's own house are the sites wherein self-fulfilment can be attained. In people's minds it is the ownership of their house that will enable them to be successful in realizing their dreams and expectations about their homes. Other research has also pointed to the significant meaning of home-ownership (Allan and Crow, 1989; Clapham, 2005; Gurney, 1997, 1999; Rowlands and Gurney, 2001; Ronald, 2008). Through ownership a sense of control is achieved, the feeling of belonging somewhere realised and identity obtained.

Dickens (1990) also sees that people are troubled about their functioning in society, when they are not complying with the existing norms and values or because they *think* they are not. But on the other hand he contests that people are slavishly following an individualistic ideology. He takes the reasoning one step further and argues that there are good reasons to aim for individualist goals when it comes to housing. Through their houses people can fulfil certain needs which they cannot fulfil through work or labour, more specifically he names safety, security and creativity (Dickens, 1994). Dickens casts a completely different light on the privileges and self-realisation, Clapham (2005) talks about: people are not free to choose their proper lifestyles and to use the house as a means to do so. No, they are *forced* to realise their natural need for self-expression via private consumption. It is precisely because the need for self-realisation is not fulfilled through labour that people have to achieve it through the consumption sphere.

As such, home-ownership can be a means to re-define one's own identity, also just because they have no other means at hand to do so.

The home, the housing estate, and the community can be seen as representing those spheres of social life in which those aspects of species being which have become suppressed at the point of production (association with other humans, engagement with nature, self-realization, assertion of personal identity and so on) can be at least partly restored or realized (Dickens, 1994: 136).

According to Dickens (1994) housing has increasingly been associated with the ability to 'take some distance', to retreat to a safe place, to a sphere the household and the individual can retreat to, where they have a feeling of autonomy. However, Dickens emphasises that this home-ownership might not be sufficient for an individual to realise their 'self-realisation'. A community feeling or a feeling of connectedness might be lost. In contradiction to Saunders (1990), Dickens states that ownership is also something that is not imperative for the formation of one's own identity. Even if it is clear that property is indeed one of the most dominant ways used to express one's identity in capitalistic and market lead societies, no proof has been delivered yet, nor from the human sciences, nor from biology, that would indicate that ownership is a biological or evolutionary need. Thus, Dickens doesn't agree with the traditional Marxist idea that self-realisation is only possible via non-alienating labour, nor with the idea that exerting oneself to own a house only reinforces the alienation. As such, the longing for a house is not a 'false need' leading to alienation of the self. In this way Dickens contests the idea that 'consumers' in a capitalistic society are mere victims of a 'goodies fetishism', he believes that people can be both 'consumers' and have an insight in their proper position in society.

The significance of this exposé regarding the dissatisfaction with the social housing sector becomes clear. The house, the housing estate and the community at large are the social spheres in which the creativity, repressed in other spheres, can be at least (partly) realised or repaired. *If* home-ownership is regarded as being better or superior to social housing, then this is because material property has become of major *symbolical* importance for the formation of one's social and personal identity. Design and possession are, within this context, ways in which people can continuously express themselves.

It is not hard to understand that households with insufficient means will have difficulties to realise this. If self-realisation can occur through ownership, then in contradiction to this, maybe social housing could lead to the opposite. As emphasised earlier, the creation of the self is realised through an owned house, which one can mould and design according to one's own

taste, lifestyle and thus identity, as such it is the free choice of every household, given of course the fact that the choice can be made. People living in social housing estates often don't have the chance to make these individual choices. Add to this the fact that, although conceived as higher status housing solutions, currently the estates house the *residue* of society, those who no longer have a choice, who are unemployed and most probably will stay unemployed for a long period of time. Bringing the quote of the Pruitt-Igoe tenant back to mind, we can emphasise that tenants on public housing estates often see themselves as inferior, precisely as a result of their specific 'status' as tenants in the public, social housing sector (Clapham, 2005)^[3]. These people are structurally discriminated, they have absolutely no power on the housing market; these people who are marginal in the production process see their marginality reproduced and enlarged in their (social) housing (estate). The physical realisation of the estate symbolises and enforces their marginalisation.

Following Dickens's reasoning, living in certain neighbourhoods is a symbol of social failure. This symbolism, the repeating emphasis put on this failure, e.g. through the media, in combination with limited opportunities, form a fertile breeding ground for deviant behaviour and sudden violent eruptions. Consequently we can evaluate the clashes, generally arising out of (deadly) confrontations with the police forces – the exponents of law and order –, as an expression of the frustration against a society that holds no (more) opportunities for these youngsters, a society that rather hides them away in large estates at the fringes of the cities ... the fringes of society. These eruptions, which at first sight seem rather useless, do have meaning. Nicole Le Guennec (1998) puts these riots into context and compares them with the historical violent struggles of the labourers in the 19th century. The apparent blind rage, the destruction of the machines ... it all seemed rather arbitrary, but it wasn't. In a time before syndicalism, the destruction of machines was used to force the employers into concessions. The acts of sabotage were part of a larger strategy, aiming at a joined struggle and the influencing of the patronage.

The same sort of phenomena is now visible in the *banlieues*. According to Le Guennec (1998) it is therefore imperative to take some perspective distance from these acts of violence before judging them. She illustrates this with an anecdote from the sociologist Lewis Coser, who after the riots in Watts, Los Angeles, in 1965 spoke to a 25 year old black, unemployed man. This man said: "*They had won.*" "*In what way won?*" asked Coser. "*Houses are destroyed, the streets are full of dead blacks, shops with food and clothes are destroyed.*" The man answered: "*We have because we have the whole world obliged to look at us. The boss of the police was here for the first time.*"

And the Mayor hadn't left the city hall before." The Watts riots were no blind lunacy. On the contrary, the goal of the conflict was the amelioration of the living conditions and the acquaintance of a dignified existence.

4 Conclusion: About the reading of Modernistic neighbourhoods

Between the fifties and the seventies numerous high-rise estates filled the skylines of the edges of Western cities. Necessity, theory and feasibility found each other. Unfortunately the estates were being constructed in a time of increasing prosperity and the birth and rise of the welfare state. The budget of the households grew and consequently so did their choosiness with regard to their housing choices. Numerous high-rise social housing estates lost their popularity and were caught up in a downward spiral of marginalisation and decay. So it doesn't come as a surprise that these estates are currently being restructured or even demolished. Besides the increase in wealth, there are additional reasons to explain the decay of the estates themselves, but an important factor definitely is the serious misjudgement concerning the meaning of the house and the home, as discussed above, which helps to understand why the 'ornament-free' housing solutions are doomed to failure.

However ... the sole thing that the design and planning community seems to remember about the failure of Modernism is that its disaster is related to the fact that the tenants of these estates did not understand the 'enlightened' visions of the Architects (with a capital A), or to quote Jencks (1987): "*.../ [T]he poor are not the nuanced and sophisticated 'readers' of architectural space the educated architects were.*" A hypothesis according to Elizabeth Birmingham (1999) is pure myth. She accurately argues that the poor tenants of the Pruitt-Igoe were very well aware of the meaning of their living environment, they read it just like outsiders did: as *an urban reserve*, a warehouse for the people at the margins. Kate Bristol (1991) rightly asserts that Pruitt-Igoe had become an anti-utopian by-product, that doesn't only incite destruction but also deserves to be destructed. The tenants of Pruitt-Igoe fought their prison-like habitat. Rather than arguing that the inhabitants were assumed to adjust themselves to their new environment, so that they would become decent middleclass hardworking citizens – the architect's point of view – she focuses on the interrelationship between the way the habitat was read by its inhabitants (see the quote earlier in this article) and their destructive reaction upon it.

Pruitt-Igoe was perceived by its inhabitants as a prison ... they accurately understood that they were locked up, far away from services, commercial activities, job opportunities and so forth.

Those who wanted to leave did not have the means to do so. But besides the symbolic interpretation, the physical resemblance to penitential architecture was quite clear: metal bars before the doors and windows, large fences, guards and an imposed segregation. Within this context, it is not hard to understand that the use of graffiti or breaking down of the fences, over and over again, has to be understood as a continuing protest against a white racist culture. Housing projects, like Pruitt-Igoe, are symbols of the structural discrimination which is strongly embedded in a complex socio-economical system, which enforces nihilistic behaviour patterns by imposing physical barriers, as such curtailing people's opportunities and chances in life.

It is precisely this analysis of the symbolic meaning of the house that helps us to understand the riots in the French *banlieues*. As argued earlier, people can create their identities through their homes, they can show who they are by the way they are living. Additionally, their homes help them to find the ontological security they are looking for; their house offers the idea of stability and the belief in a safe future. But these are elements that are taken from people in social rental estates, where everything looks the same and one's identity has to be expressed in the same little window as that of the 200 other neighbours in the estate. When people become aware of this – and they are, as illustrated above –, when they start to see that their integration as a *normal* (read middle class, white, hard working) citizen in the contemporary neo-liberal society, becomes almost impossible – not through labour, nor through housing – it is not surprising that their actions aimed at the society, regime and media who condemned them to a life at the margins, are becoming increasingly more radical.

.....
 Dr. Pascal De Decker, Sociologist and Urban Planner, Professor
 Hogeschool Gent and Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, Brussels
 and Ghent, Belgium
 E-mail: pascal.de.decker@skynet.be

Dr. Caroline Newton, Architect, Political Scientist and Urban planner,
 Professor
 Hogeschool Gent and Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, Brussels
 and Ghent, Belgium
 E-mail: caroline.newton@mac.com

Notes

- [1] *Habitation à loyer modéré*, French for 'housing at a reduced tariff'.
 [2] Le Corbusier flirted with the Vichy regime, but they eventually didn't see much in his urban proposals neither.
 [3] Clapham (2005) also mentions the following research: Centre for Housing Research (1989) *The nature and effectiveness of housing management in England*. London, HMSO. Cairncross, L., Clapham, D., and Goodlad, R. (1997) *Housing management, consumers and citizens*. London, Routledge. Bines W., Kemp, P., Pleace, N., and Radley, C. (1993)

Managing social housing. London, HMSO. Saunders P. (1990) *A nation of home owners*. London, Unwin Hyman.

References

- Allan, G., and Crow, G. (1989) *Home and family: Creating the domestic sphere*. London, Macmillan.
 Altman, I., and Werner, C. M. (1985) *Home environments: Human behaviour and environment*. New York, Plenum Press.
 Bakker, J. H. (2008) *Welkom in megapolis. Denken over wonen, stad en toekomst*. Amsterdam, Atlas.
 Birmingham, E. (1999) Reframing the ruins: Pruitt-Igoe, structural racism, and African American rhetoric as a space for cultural critique. *Western Journal of Communication*, 63(3), pp. 291–309.
 Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
 Bristol, K. G. (1991) The Pruitt-Igoe myth. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 44(3), pp. 163–171.
 Clapham, D. (2005) *The meaning of housing: A pathways approach*. Bristol, The Policy Press.
 Coleman, A. (1985) *Utopia on trial: Vision and reality in planned housing*. London, Hilary Shipman.
 De Decker, P. (1987) Gebouwde omgeving en criminaliteit. Enkele kritische beschouwingen m.b.t. de revival van het fysisch determinisme. In: van der Cammen, H., and Smeele, P. (eds.) *Planologische Discussiebijdragen deel 1*, pp. 161–170. Delft, Delftse Uitgeverij/maatschappij/Stichting Planologische Discussiedagen.
 De Decker, P. (2005) 'In sommige sociale woonblokken zou ik mijn konijnen nog niet durven steken'. Over sociaal huren, de creatie van een reputatie en haar gevolgen. In: De Decker, P., Goossens, L., and Pannecoucke, I. (eds.) *Wonen aan de onderkant*, pp. 238–299. Antwerpen, Garant.
 De Decker, P., Meeus, B., and Newton, C. (2009) *Only for neat people. On the changing discourse on social rental housing in Flanders, Belgium and its consequences*. Typescript.
 Dickens, P. (1990) *Urban sociology. Society, locality and human nature*. New York, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
 Dickens, P. (1994) Modernity, alienation and environment: some aspects of housing tenure, design, and social identity. In: Danermark, B., and Elander, I., (eds.) *Social rented housing in Europe: Policy, tenure and design*, pp. 123–138. Delft, DUP.
 Dupuis, A., and Thorns, D. C. (1998) Home, Home ownership and the search for ontological security. *Sociological Review*, 46(1), pp. 24–47.
 Fishman, R. (1977) *Urban utopias in the twentieth century. Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier*. New York, Basic Books.
 Fitting, P. (2002) Urban planning/utopian dreaming: Le Corbusier's Chandigarh today. *Utopian Studies*, 13(1), pp. 69–93.
 Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society: Outline of a theory of structuration*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
 Giddens, A. (1990) *The consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.

- Gropius, W. (1962) Sociological premises for the minimum dwelling of urban industrial populations. In: Gropius, W. (ed.) *The scope of total architecture*, pp. 91–102. New York, Collier Books.
- Gurney, C. M. (1997) "... Half of me was satisfied": Making sense of home through episodic ethnographies. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20(3), pp. 373–386.
- Gurney, C. M. (1999) Pride and prejudice: Discourses of normalisation in public and private accounts of home ownership. *Housing Studies*, 14(2), pp. 163–183.
- Hall, P. (1988) *Cities of tomorrow*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Hoefnagels, G. P. (1974) Menselijke maat en wonen; een interactionistische benadering. *Stedebouw en Volkshuisvesting*, 55, pp. 326–331.
- Internet 1: <http://images.google.com> (Date accessed 25. 9. 2009).
- Jacobs, J. (1961) *The death and life of great American cities*. New York, Vintage.
- Jencks, C. (1977) *The language of post-modern architecture*. New York, Rizzoli.
- Kesteloot, C. (1988) *Accumulation regimes, reproduction of labour force and the organization of urban residential space: The case of Belgium*. Typescript.
- Kesteloot, C., and Meys, S. (2008) *Achtergestelde buurten in Vlaanderen en Brussel*. Leuven, ISEG, K. U. Leuven.
- Le Guennec, N. (1998) Les institutions dans l'oeil du cyclone. In: Body-Gendrot, S., Le Guennec, N., and Herrou, M. (eds.) *Mission sur les violences urbaines*, pp. 13–46. Paris, La documentation française.
- Loos, A. (1908) *Ornament und Verbrechen*. Innsbruck, Brenner Verlag.
- Mallet, S. (2004) Understanding home: A critical review of the literature. *The Sociological Review*, 52(1), pp. 62–89.
- Murie, A., Knorr-Siedow, T., and van Kempen, R. (2003) *Large housing estates in Europe. General developments and theoretical backgrounds, Restate report 1*. Research report. Utrecht, Urban and regional research centre.
- Newman, O. (1973) *Defensible space: People & design in the violent city*. London, Architectural Press.
- Newton, C. (2008a) ... *And back to basics: Understanding the essence of house and home and its political consequences*. Typescript.
- Newton, C. (2008b) *Social Housing, urban policy and social capital: Spatial interrelations in a third world context (Cape Town)*. Ph.D. thesis. Leuven, K. U. Leuven.
- Page, D. (1994) *Developing communities*. Teddington, Sutton Hstoe Housing Association.
- Power, A. (1997) *Estates on the edge. The social consequences of mass housing in Northern Europe*. London, MacMillan.
- Priemus, H., and Prak, N. L. (1985) *Post-war public housing in trouble*. Delft, DUP.
- Rakoff, R. M. (1977) Ideology in everyday life: The meaning of the house. *Politics and Society*, 7(1), pp. 85–104
- Ronald, R. (2008) *The ideology of home ownership. Homeowner societies and the role of housing*. Palgrave, Basingstoke.
- Rowlands, R., and Gurney, C. M. (2001) Young people's perceptions of housing tenure: A case study in the socialisation of tenure prejudice. *Housing, Theory, and Society*, 17(3), pp. 121–130.
- Saunders, P. (1990) *A nation of homeowners*. London, Unwin Hyman.
- Schuré, E. (1889) *Les Grands Initiés*. Paris, Perrin.
- Scott, J. (1999) *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Sennett, R., and Cobb, J. (1972) *The hidden injuries of class*. New York, Norton.
- Tuan, Y. F. (1975) Place: An experiential perspective. *Geographical Review*, 65(2), pp. 151–165.
- Turkington, R., van Kempen, R., and Wassenberg, F. (2004) High-rise housing in Europe. Current trends and future prospects. *Housing and Urban Policy Studies*, 28, pp. 15–30.
- Van Eyck, A. (1959) Het verhaal van een andere gedachte. *Forum*, 9, pp. 198–248.
- Wacquant, L. (1992) Banlieues françaises et ghetto noir américain: de l'amalgame à la comparaison. *French Politics and Society*, 10(4), pp. 68–81.
- Wu, K. M. (1993) The other is my hell; The other is my home. *Human Studies*, 16(1–2), pp. 193–202.