Elain Harwood and Alan Powers's
Housing the Twentieth Century Nation
Twentieth Century Architecture 9: Journal of The Twentieth Century Society
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This publication is ninth in a series of books by the Twentieth Century Society. The series opened in 1994 with an issue on industrial architecture; it aims to provide a scholarly - and also accessible - insight to the best examples of modern and modernist architecture in the United Kingdom. The Twentieth Century Society was originally founded as the Thirties Society in 1979 to protect designs of that period from adaptation and demolition. Amongst various campaigns, the Society as recently fought the demolition of the Robin Hood Gardens Estate in Poplar, East London.

Housing the Twentieth Century Nation covers the most famous (as well as the most notorious) stories of British public housing in the last century, including Roehampton, Somerstown, Byker and the Mozart Estate. Its geographical coverage is also extensive, although by nature of the topic, its focus is primarily urban and particularly on London. Organised chronologically, the book opens with a chapter by Barbara Linsley on the Homes-Fit-for-Heroes programme in post WW1 Wales, discusses amongst others the post-war planning of the New Town Cumbernauld in Scotland and sheds new light on famous housing developments, such as Byker in Newcastle. The book in its entirety serves as an important appraisal of the impact of architectural ideas during a period of significant social upheaval. There are several chapters where there is a focus on the architect of the original scheme. This is particularly successful in the chapter on Byker, where Ralph Erskine's involvement in the early period of the project justifiably forms part of the appraisal by the author, Michael Drage, of the estate's social history (this chapter is supported by some particularly handsome illustrations). Frequently the examples outlined highlight the highly experimental nature of the form, construction methods, layout and management that the people who chose - or more frequently for whom circumstances chose - that they experience this new architecture. The richness of examples is slightly let down by the lack of thematic linking between the chapters as well as the varying approaches to subject matter. Readers of the book will find that the prominent theme that emerges is the impact of architectural experimentation on the inhabitants of the new housing. The book ends with a useful selection of housing bibliography.
The book's last chapter is likely to be of particular interest to readers of the Journal of Space Syntax, due to its detailed account of the application of space syntax ideas to the regeneration of a single housing estate between 1985 and 2004. Written by Jonah Lowenfeld - 'Estate Regeneration in Practice' opens with a description of the Mozart Estate, a low-rise complex of social housing, which won architectural awards soon after it was first built in 1974. The estate's rapid physical and social decline towards being labelled a 'sink estate' led to a “fierce debate” in the architectural press around the possibility that this exemplified architectural determinism whilst others blamed social mix, poor policing and poor management on the estate's problems. Lowenfeld describes at considerable length the key players in the debate. He discusses the influential publication of Alice Coleman's 'Utopia on Trial', in which she outlined her analysis that social exclusion and poverty is attributed to the process of urban development, the effect of social choices, and the outcome of economic constraints. Lowenfeld suggests that concern with Coleman's work and its influence were the main impetus for the important 'Rehumanizing Housing' conference held in 1987, in which the pathology of twentieth century housing became the top of the agenda for British architects. Bill Hillier's article 'City of Alice's Dreams' and ultimately the first proposals for physical modification of housing estates described in 'Against Enclosure' (published in the conference book in 1988) subsequently led to the development of design guidance for the physical modification of social housing estates. Lowenfeld's chapter provides a detailed description of these guidelines and the way in which they influenced the regeneration of the Mozart Estate. He describes how the first stage of the regeneration took place in conjunction with Coleman, although she later distanced herself from it. Alongside infilling and densification, the modifications were influenced by Newman's defensible space ideas, whilst Coleman apparently attempted to reduce the permeability of the estate's paths and upper-level walkways. The author reports that the latter was severely criticised in a report by Bill Hillier and Alan Penn, who maintained that the removal of the walkways was planned with little understanding of their effect on the tenants' circulation patterns.

Despite the ultimate fall from favour of Coleman's ideas, the long-term impact of her book alongside some key ideas from space syntax are highlighted in the chapter's conclusions, which suggest that both defensible space ideas and space syntax ideas have permeated modern housing theory. It should be noted that the author also maintains that management and social programmes are now seen to be of equal importance for the success of social housing schemes. Lowenfeld suggests that the most important long-term outcome of the period he examines has been the recognition by the current generation of architects that the architectural discipline is partially responsible for past failures yet also now has the tools to “address the challenge of mass housing” (p. 174). He maintains that architects now recognise their ability to “reassert a role for their profession in the provision of housing that is social, human, and affordable” (ibid). It remains an open question in the current economic climate whether the discipline will have the necessary economic support and political will to realise this essential outcome.
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