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Published in 2009 by John Wiley and Sons, The Urban Housing Handbook, co-authored by Firley and Stahl, examines low- and mid-rise urban housing development in relation both to architectural and urban design. The book presents an extensive range of both historic and contemporary residential examples from various urban environments from around the world. A follow-on book, The Urban Towers Handbook, published by Wiley in 2011 and co-authored by Firley and Gimbal, aims to provide the same parallel consideration of architecture and urban fabric, only in this case, for high-rise urban development. Both books aim to contextualise issues relating to design processes, in order to provide an explicit understanding of how urban situation influences housing layout and design. A designer’s perspective is evident in both cases (both Firley and Stahl are practitioners), with the use of graphics and textual analysis to address the complexity of these topics. Firley’s interdisciplinary background (the author has studied economics, architecture and urban design) and Gimbal’s profound historic engagement with the subject (Gimbal has a doctorate on high-rise architecture in France) have been instrumental in the discussions developed in the second book.
In *The Urban Housing Handbook* thirty cases of ‘traditional’ residential buildings are organised in four typological groups and presented accordingly with the following order: Courtyard Houses (examples from Beijing, Buenos Aires, Quito, Marrakesh, Kyoto, Tokyo and Sana’a), Row Houses (in Mulhouse, Singapore, Paris and two cases from London), Compounds (in Shanghai, Santiago, Paris, Hamburg and Ahmedabad) and finally, Apartment Buildings (examples from Dresden, Chicago, Copenhagen, Genoa, Budapest, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Montreal, Berlin, Paris, Barcelona and New York). Courtyard and Row Houses refer to single-family residential models, while Compounds and Apartments represent multi-family dwellings. The book closes with two tables, which summarise key characteristics for all four typologies, structuring a comprehensive comparison across the cases.

A rather interesting aspect of this typological categorisation lies in its criteria being the built footprint of the building within the private lot and the developed relations between interior and exterior. The way in which the domestic interior is related to both the street’s public domain and the internal open space of the block configuration, is thus presented as the core idea. As the authors discuss, this methodological choice fundamentally differentiates the *Handbook* from purely aesthetical judgements and so provides clues regarding the performance (both spatial and social) of the residence within its surrounding context. It could be said that the authors’ typologies relate to the principles introduced by Sherwood (1978), in his classification of *Modern Housing Prototypes* based on building orientation. Sherwood highlighted the importance of plans and sections as core elements in an analytical approach. What differentiates Firley and Stahl’s *Handbook* is the prism through which the theme of housing is filtered; the study does not refer to particular architectural movements and thus, it does not exclude housing types because of aesthetic, functional and implicit theoretical propositions. Instead, the only criterion is the low- and mid-rise height parameter as a general filter, and the placement of the building within the lot/block as a particularised factor. This provides an understanding of urban housing situations removed from any notion of architectural determinism and consequently places the dwelling closer to its informal role and context (not the case for instance, of a quite similar approach and almost synchronous publication, Hilary French’s *Key Urban Housing of the Twentieth Century: Plans, Sections and Elevations* - published in 2008 - which also presents plans of both the dwelling and the block, but still focuses primarily on architectural judgements).

The housing book presents each typology in relation to different socio-spatial urban complexes from around the world. The individual cases were selected according to their significance as models of urban living for the cities in which they are located. Houses are systematically discussed in terms of their *History and Development*, the *Urban Configuration* of the surroundings and the *Architecture* of the particular type. The presentation is accompanied by rich visual-graphic material; both for the surrounding area (aerial views and maps of the built footprint) and for the buildings themselves (including photographic record, plans and sections). The consistency of the visual and graphical information, alongside the thematically consistent discussion, provides a consistent record of all presented cases, and thus enables the reader to draw comparative references, not only in terms of the discussed typological groups, but in a cross-cultural consideration as well.
Additionally, every historic example is paired (and juxtaposed) with a contemporary design approach. Examples were chosen for their similarity with regard to context and fundamental design features; the recent housing sample includes projects of well-known architectural practices, like Atelier Bow-Wow, BIG, Morphosis, MVRDV and SANNA. The fact that the 'traditional' houses selected are studied within the contemporary urban context is then understood as another conscious methodological choice that refers to an implicit comparison between the performance of the historic and contemporary types. Although the authors do not state a point of view – instead leaving it to the reader to make their own interpretations – they do raise an insightful reflection on the design intentions of recent architectural solutions: the degree to which contemporary housing projects relate to the notion of a 'type' or of a 'prototype'. In the authors' words: ‘Do architects today still think in types, or is the current aim to produce a prototype that will keep its individualistic and singular qualities? If this is the case, is it linked to the structure of the construction industry or to the mindset of our society?’ (p. 13).

Issues regarding design policies and 'signature architecture' are also raised (and more extensively discussed) in *The Urban Towers Handbook*. In this case, Firley and Gimbal, after introducing the subject and its complexity, organise the research content in three sections. In the first, the typological grouping of tower buildings (defined as a minimum of ten-storeys high) is characterised, again based on the arrangement of the building in relation to the block configuration and the islands created in the urban fabric. The three groups are: *Solitaires, Clusters and Vertical Cities*. As in the previous book, more than fifty examples from a worldwide origin are presented, organised in sub-groups depending on how they are related to the surrounding urban area (i.e. Kenzo Tange’s Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building is classified as a *Solitaire* and in the sub-group *Tower as Team Player*). The reader develops an understanding of the early innovative construction of New York towers (Rockefeller, 1939), of materialisations of the modernist declarations of the CIAM in Athens (both for housing schemes, like the Hansaviertel in Berlin, and for metropolitan towers like the Seagram), up to their post-modern counterparts (Torre Velasca, in Milan). In the latter case the authors show how post-modernism favoured aesthetic historicity over function and modernity (see discussion by Huxtable, 1986, reprinted this month in *Blueprint* to coincide with the post-modernism exhibition at the V&A). Moreover, the examples presented include organic assemblages of high-rise development (like the case of Monaco), as well as towers-spectacles constructed with the most advanced construction systems (i.e. the towers for 'La Défense Renewal Plan'). A table at the end of the book summarises the typological groups and their properties (height, development area, site area, site coverage, plot ratio).

As in the housing book, the presentation method remains systematic across examples: every sub-group is represented by a primary example given in greater detail, followed by two cases discussed more briefly. Photographic material and plans of each tower’s footprint on the urban grid are slightly more prominent in this case, which can be explained by the difference in scale of the buildings plans: the towers’ handbook mainly addresses the impact of these grand architectural gestures as urban units within a city’s physical and symbolic realm, rather than giving detail of the building interior. This helps justify the fact that the examples are varied in terms of functional/social programming, ranging
In the second section, urban planning policies and the way these have shaped regulations for high-rise development in seven different cities around the world (London, Frankfurt, Vienna, Paris, New York, Hong Kong, Singapore), are extensively discussed. The Background/Context within which high-rise development emerged in the particularised urban environment, the Originators of Urban Regulations and Responsibilities and the Zoning/Urban Planning regulations set the basis of understanding each city’s Urban Skyline/Cityscape, the recommended Tower Design parameters recommended by the local planning authority, the implemented Building Codes/Fire Safety regulations and finally the concerns arising regarding the Ecology of tower design. This structure highlights differences between cities contending with preservation issues (like London and Vienna) in contrast with urban environments (like New York and Singapore) who became rapidly familiar with high-rise development, and others (like Paris) that still question and often reject the implications of tower buildings. The book also acknowledges organised efforts to balance policies between urban planning, leasehold and building regulations (such as in the case of Hong Kong).

This second section, along with the last part of the book that discusses sustainability issues, makes a clear methodological differentiation between The Urban Towers Handbook and its predecessor, the Housing Handbook. This distinction can be seen a reflection of the relative historical depth of the two projects. The low- and mid-rise development has been present as constituent element of urban systems (and consequently of societies) throughout their whole historic existence, and thus recording and reflecting on these from a distance is clearly achievable. On the other hand, since high-rise development has only relatively recently been extensively practiced, a basic understanding of the factors that shape the phenomenon - both architecturally but mainly in terms of governance and policies - is more crucial to architectural practice. Moreover, housing design at the scale of low- and mid-rise development, is mainly challenged by its social performance, while high-rise development (whether mixed-use, commercial, institutional or residential) is by virtue of it being a stronger spatial affirmation, related to developmental processes, policies and politics of urban space. While both books discuss the building from a fundamental urban-based logic, they are differentiated in the way in which they address the role of building function within the urban complex. In this way, both books serve respectively their role as handbooks, as tools that provide an adjusted understanding of various urban situations.

It is exactly this urban scale based consideration of the building types that will be of interest to the readers of the Journal of Space Syntax. Both Handbooks consider the block as the determining element of the intermediary scale between building and urban fabric and recognise three major elements for this scale: the street, the building and the interior of the block. In the first book, the categorisation of housing typologies based on this consideration (rather than based on aesthetic architectural properties or on properties of a self-referential function of the interior plan), is profoundly related to the work of Julienne Hanson regarding urban interfaces (Hanson 2000; Hanson and Zako, 2007).
and the liveability of streets, as well as to matters of social correspondence and non-correspondence discussed by Hanson and Hillier (1987) in the ‘Architecture of Community’. Indeed, while browsing the contemporary cases, one cannot avoid thinking whether these could generate and support ‘probabilistic’ urban schemes. Particularly in the examples of housing complexes – where repetition of the same housing units is a usual way of assembling these complexes -, the weakness of contemporary architectural interventions becomes instantly more evident for a reader familiar with space syntax research. On the other hand, in the second book, the presentation of maps that record the location of high-rise development within the urban grid raises questions regarding the potential syntactic properties of this allocation and its relation to a city’s ‘foreground’ network (Hillier, 2002).

These linkages to space syntax research are just examples of how these two books can be related to the interests of the readers of JOSS. The Handbooks beautifully put architecture into its urban context, and provide a useful tool for designers, architecture and urban thinkers to renegotiate the relationship between the building and the urban scenery, emphasising the intermediary scale; the books themselves stand as intermediaries between architectural practice and urban design, and moreover, between an aesthetic understanding and a more analytical approach. As such, I find that they can be informative and thought provoking both for practitioners and space syntax researchers.

References