Housing in Europe

Edited by Martin Wynn

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INTRODUCTION

by Martin Wynn

This book sets out to examine housing problems, policies and products in selected European countries in the post-war era.[1] The nine countries studied in detail provide a fair cross-section of Europe's varying socio-political systems, two thirds of which may be described as market economies, and the remainder as centrally planned economies. Housing policy and production is, of course, closely linked to a number of socio-political-economic factors and relationships. As one author has recently commented, "housing manifests the political and economic climate found in a society as well as does any other facet of national experience."[2]

Despite cultural, political and economic differences, the tools adopted by European governments for intervening in the housing sector are not that diverse, although how they have been used in shaping housing production has varied considerably. Most of Europe faced acute housing deficits in the post-war, and the overall goal of meeting these shortages was common to most European governments until recently. Now, however, with the quantitative deficits gone or much diminished, qualitative deficiencies are emerging as a major focus for revised or new policies, involving more sophisticated instruments, often more difficult to administer.

At the end of the Second World War, as much as 22%[3] of the housing stock was destroyed or damaged to such an extent as to be uninhabitable. National deficits were exacerbated by the return of troops and the unpreparedness of the building industry - run down after several years of relative inactivity - to cope with production requirements. The search for new housing and employment opportunities resulted in massive country-city migrations, above all in Southern and Eastern Europe, where urban growth

rates were three times comparable national figures over the period 1950-70. The need to invest in industry and infrastructure meant that housing deficits remained or worsened in the forties and fifties in many countries, and only by the late fifties were shortages beginning to be substantially reduced by increased production.

During this post-war era, housing policy in Western Europe tended to focus at first on the use of rent freezes as a means of protecting the consumer from rapid rent increases. Later, subsidies to house constructors were introduced to stimulate production, and the promotion of public and non-profit housing agencies was encouraged in some countries. Meanwhile in Eastern Europe, the foundations of large scale production machinery in the construction industry were laid. In all Europe, land-use planning and environmental considerations were often overlooked in an era when the emphasis was on housing production figures rather than qualitative aspects.

By the 1960s, the construction industry was expanding rapidly and the 'boom' growth of major urban centres followed. Annual housing production figures attained new peaks, averaging eight dwellings per 1000 inhabitants in Europe in 1970. Many countries in both East and West markedly changed their housing policies in the sixties and seventies to bring about a more efficient and equitable use of resources. In Western Europe, a variety of new forms of subsidy were introduced. In France, new forms of cheap loans for aspiring house purchasers came into effect in conjunction with a radically reformed savings scheme for home purchase - the Compte d'Epargne Logement - to encourage individual savings. Similar developments occurred in other countries: in West Germany, Netherlands and Denmark, new systems were introduced in the sixties which resulted in a far higher initial subsidy of rents in state aided construction.

Many other variations were introduced as regards the size and nature of state subsidies and inhabitants alike, benefitting from such schemes. Rent controls which had originated in the immediate post war or before were phased out in many western countries in the sixties, and incremental rent increases authorized. Direct financial aid to low-income groups also came into prominence in the West. The private sector (aided and non-aided) accounted for the bulk of new construction in these years, although public managed bodies (including co-

operatives and associations) constructed over a third of the new stock in Belgium, Holland and the United Kingdom (Table 1.1). In the East European

Table 1.1 Private Sector-Public Sector House Construction in Some Western European Countries, 1960-75 (annual average).

Country	Public authorities and publicly controlled associations and co-operatives	Private sector
Belgium (1964-74)	34.4	65.6
Denmark	31.1	68.9
France	32.1	67.9
Netherlands	47.2	52.8
Spain	10.1	89.9
United Kingdom	45.5	54.5
West Germany	24.5	75.5

Source: Annual Bulletin of Housing and Building Statistics for Europe 1975 (ECE/UN, New York, 1976)

Socialist States, although there were considerable differences between individual countries, the rise in house production figures was somewhat less marked than in much of the West. Housing, viewed as a social right, was paid for by small percentage contributions (usually less than 10%) from personal incomes, often supplemented by extra funds from the national budgets. Compared with the West, this produced somewhat less overall investment in housing, with the respective figures for housing production and usable floorspace per dwelling being lower in the East than the West in the seventies. (Table 1.2).

The economic recession which started with the oil crisis of 1973-4 hit the construction sector particularly hard, and above all the house-building sub-sector. The drying-up of demand, the increase in the material costs of production and higher interest rates contributed to significant drops in annual house construction in Western European nations in the seventies (Table 1.3), with its consequent implications for employment and overall housing provision. Government responses have included a reduction of subsidies to house constructors and increases in direct aid to families for house purchase. In West Germany and Spain, there