

A Springboard for Complexity: The User as a Critique of Modernist Architectural Conventions, ca. 1960

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ABSTRACT

This essay outlines the influence that the new guidelines and conventions introduced by the postwar representations of the user exerted on the design of collective housing during the period between ca. 1950 and ca. 1970. It analyzes the forces that brought them to the fore, its various meanings, the polemics it was part of, and fundamentally, how its instrumentalization ushered in a new agenda of heterogeneity – a process that allowed a drastic raising of the threshold of architecture’s formal and procedural complexity. The conclusions establish that what had been initially posited as a set of external demands on architectural design became a means by which the discipline was able to adapt and exert its influence on the new cultural conditions of what would later be described as the era of postfordism. The findings of the essay are based on a review of relevant primary sources as well as recent historiographical discussions of the architecture of the postwar period.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE USER

Since the 18th Century, the practical act of erecting a structure for basic habitation was regarded as both the mythic origin and the other of modern architecture. By seeking to endow even the most rudimentary structure with esthetic qualities, 20th Century modernism turned this myth into an expansive agenda: a sustained attempt to raise a fragment of reality – any such fragment – from the field of the generic or, as Mies van der Rohe would have it, “providing conditions under which the spirit can exist” (1930/1991, p. 309). However, the confrontation between a logic of autonomous aesthetic production and the credo of the discipline as a practical service has remained at the core of a pendular debate since the decade of 1950, when architecture chose to engage with the logics of housing production of the welfare State. Modern architecture’s legitimacy was thoroughly questioned by this encounter. So profound was the revision imposed on it, that an entirely new configuration of knowledge was forced to emerge; one whose contours still condition our understanding of what architecture, today, is all about. The revision implied nothing less than the upgrading of the arsenal of modern disciplinary capabilities, making it possible to practice and theorize architecture in unforeseen ways. It became possible, for example, for architects to enlist notions such as the ordinary, the layperson, the everyday, and the user as conceptual levers within the design process. But this entailed an

apparently irresolvable paradox, for if those concepts were thought of, in the first place, as capable of challenging modernism’s technocratic abstraction, they were, nonetheless, constructed abstractions themselves.

This essay outlines the influence that the discourse of the user exerted on the design of collective housing during the period between ca. 1950 and ca. 1970, an epoch during which the critique of modernist expert knowledge became a threat to the continuity of architecture as a discipline. It analyzes the forces that brought the notion of the user to the fore, its various meanings, the polemics it was part of and, fundamentally, how its instrumentalization ushered in a new agenda of heterogeneity – a process that resulted in the raising of the threshold of architecture’s formal and procedural complexity to previously unknown heights. The internalization of the polemics of the user and its latent agenda of complexity contributed to salvaging architecture from its potential dissolution in the hands of competing technologies that claimed to be better equipped to deal with the demands of what would be later described as the era of postfordism. As they adjusted to the cultural and political conditions of the postwar period, architects were challenged to develop frameworks to overcome the aporias of interwar CIAM ideology and to give birth to new forms of intellectual leadership. Such developments took place most prominently in a transnational space within northern Europe, establishing

strong connections to Africa, North, and South America. Chronologically, they functioned as a bridge between the 'heroic period' of modern architecture, and an epoch characterized by disappointment, skepticism, and general suspicion about the project of modernity.

As discussed in detail by English architectural historian Adrian Forty (2000, pp. 312–315), the discourse on the user emerged in the early 60's amid a frenzy of construction and planning projects in Europe. Indeed, the postwar period is known to have borne witness to an unmatched historical effort to expand and rebuild the housing stock over a broad territory encompassing parts of the United Kingdom, Holland, Germany, France, and Sweden – where the Million Homes program was successfully carried out between 1965 and 1974 –, and (under different conditions) Eastern Europe and the Americas. Stemming from 50's anthropology and empirical sociology and turning into a growing set of official prescriptions for urban and architectural design, the influence of the emerging representations of the user soon became widespread. The rise of the user in architecture thus partakes of a movement away from modernist universalism, toward augmenting culture's sensitivity for the local and particular (Frampton, 1983). Attested to by the ever-expanding circulation of architectural publications, the exchange and 'trafficking' of ideas through apprenticeships, study trips, and site visits, together with an interest in local climates, technologies, habits, and traditions, the user became a signpost of a debate that crossed cultural and geographic barriers in an increasingly globalized exchange.

To posit the user as a key conceptual figure in the history of social housing must lead to an analysis of the dynamic

nature of the representations of the individual and the collective, and the practices and artifacts that they made possible. Constructed on the basis of scientific studies of human behavior (Boudon, 1972; Cooper-Marcus, 1977; Gutman, 1972), and applied in various ways to design practice, these conceptions served to orchestrate such relationships materially, within the transition from a societal model structured by the Keynesian ideals of State planning and regulation to a subsequent system characterized by ideals of self-regulation, in which both the market and the civil society were to acquire predominant roles.

Stranded between two epochs, the user functioned as a bridge with productively ambivalent connotations. Until the late 50's the term was seldom employed, and when it appeared – for example, during the 40's and early 50's in France it was deployed by André Lurçat in his work in Maubege (Cupers, 2014, p. 60), and by Le Corbusier in *Manière de penser l'urbanisme* (1946) and *Le Modulor II* (1955) –, it lacked a defined disciplinary agenda. It was either used in a general sense or under the assumption that it referred to a citizen whose position within the collective was defined by its interaction with the State; an interaction limited, at least theoretically, to receiving its provisions and benefits, and to participate in public matters by voting. This situation would change drastically in the early 60's when the scientific construction of the concept was to adopt distinct political overtones.

TOWARDS A SCIENCE OF NEEDS

If the widespread adoption of the term user would take place only in discussions on housing and institutional architecture at the beginning of the 60's, the figure of

the recipient of State benefits in the form of a dwelling and its furnishings had already become the focus of architectural attention of interwar modernism. Although this attention by no means involved analytical constructions as those produced by postwar human sciences, the issue of human needs as a determinant of architectural form had been raised already by the early 20's. One need not go further than recalling Le Corbusier's plea (1925/1987, Chapter 6, pp. 69–79) for the recognition of type-needs as the basis of standardization in industrial production. Individual expression within the dwelling, previously achieved in the bourgeois house by means of the idiosyncratic combination of decorative furniture, was to be jettisoned by the recognition of the universality of the human condition. In *The Decorative Art of Today*, he would write: "To search for human scale, for human function, is to define human needs. They are not very numerous; they are very similar for all mankind since man has been made from the same mold from the earliest times known to us" (*Le Corbusier*, 1925/1987, p. 72), clarifying with candor that "the client [of decorative art] is a man, familiar to all of us, and precisely defined" (*Le Corbusier*, 1925/1987, p. 72). But in the postwar scenario, Le Corbusier's niceties from the 20's were no longer viable. The success achieved in the 50's by the new disciplines of housing sociology, housing psychology, and urban sociology, would mean that State-sponsored empirical research, executive reports, and guidelines for design could acquire normative status. Examples of this type of research flourished in north Atlantic networks (Bauer, 1951; Cohen, 1951; Merton, 1948; Riemer & Demerath, 1952). In the United States, the Ford Foundation established the Educational Facilities Laboratories as a center for the study

of school building models, under the spell of functionalist sociology, issuing significant reports and recommendations for architectural design (Sachs, 2013). The early French experience (Cupers, 2014) is perhaps best represented by the studies of urban sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, whose findings based on empirical surveys resulted in practical recommendations for design and space planning standards for housing (Newsome, 2009, pp. 130–131). Likewise, entities such as the Housing Research Unit – later, Architecture Research Unit – founded by Robert Matthew at Edinburgh University in 1958, would build on the tradition established in the 20's by the Building Research Station (García Ferrari et al., 2008), displacing its orientation from construction and fireproofing to usage and experience evaluation.

The British experience in this field is noteworthy not just due to its articulation between State regulation and architectural research, but also because of the dissemination and institutionalization of knowledge produced through numerous official publications. As mentioned, the construction efforts that needed to be undertaken immediately after the end of the war demanded a great deal of systematization and expediency. During the early years of the reconstruction, the rebuilding activities could not avoid a marked emphasis on output and a focus on ameliorating the overcrowded conditions that characterized much urban housing built since the 19th Century.⁽¹⁾ This was reflected in official

documents issued in preparation for postwar reconstruction such as the report by the government-appointed Dudley Commission's 1944 Housing Manual (Ministry of Health & Ministry of Works, 1944), which identified 'special occupants' such as rural workers, old people, and single persons, and defined strict standards for room sizes and recommended adequate-size neighborhood units of 5 to 10 thousand people. The 1944 Manual was augmented by a 1949 revision (Ministry of Health & Ministry of Works, 1949), which emphasized the diversity of dwelling types and treated each type in detail. But it was not until the publication of the Parker Morris Report (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1961) that sociological research became an influential factor in shaping a generic idea of the user in the British context. Parker Morris Report was followed by the publication, also by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (1968), of a number of didactic Design Manuals meant to ensure that designers and developers would stick to the latest findings on patterns of living by means of checklists, standard plans, diagrams, and dimensional tables (Hole & Attenburrow, 1966).

Homes for Today and Tomorrow, as the report by the Parker Morris Commission was titled, created standards for housing design that would dominate public housing output until it was abolished in 1980. Based on extensive empirical research and conceptual guidance from sociology, the report acknowledged a drastic shift in the social and urban conditions in Britain.

Since the end of the war [the report stated], the country has undergone a social and economic revolution, and

the pattern of living is still changing fast. There is full employment, a National Health Service, and the various social insurance benefits such as family allowances and retirement pensions. In material terms, people are better off than ever before (...). One household in three has a car, the same proportion have a washing machine. Television sets are owned by two households in three; so are vacuum cleaners; and one household in five has a refrigerator (...). All these changes are beginning to mean a more enjoyable home life. (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1961, pp. 1-2)

Based on this diagnosis, the recommendations issued in the report dealt with three main themes: space standards, flexibility, and diversity of dwelling types. Space standards were to be increased in housing in response to the greater number of belongings, including household appliances, furniture, personal items, and cars, owned by the occupant. In particular, this should be translated into increased storage space, as well as balconies and outdoor recreation space. The issue of flexibility was also seen as critical for the design of future homes. Two assumptions underlay this: on one hand, the idea that greater efficiency of use would be possible if a homogeneous heating system was to be provided; on the other, the belief that an analytical framework for the design of the dwelling should look primarily at activities, instead of being fixated on the sizes of rooms. The occupant was seen to require isolation and privacy for certain activities, but if the coal-fueled fireplace remained the sole – or main – source of heating for the dwelling, then possibilities for simultaneous usage of the different

(1) According to Patrick Dunleavy (1981), at an average rate of about 120,000 units of public housing per year, the 50's saw a steady decline (until 1964) of low-rise construction and a steep increase in the construction of high-rise tower-blocks, which peaked in 1966.

rooms in the house would be curtailed. Likewise, space standards were no longer regarded as a property of individual rooms but were considered in relation to the entire dwelling. As a consequence of this, greater freedom was given to the designers as well as to the occupants, who might wish to rearrange the layout of their homes in connection to their evolving lifestyles without bureaucratic hindrances.⁽²⁾ Finally, the report considered different forms of cohabitation, subsumed under the label 'families': couples with children, married couples, persons living alone, and elderly couples. Although this classification was still basic, it hinted at increasing awareness of the diversity of the social fabric that the housing process was catered to. In translating an empirically informed conception into operative guidelines, the Parker Morris Report became a landmark episode within the process of construction of the new conventions that characterized the prevailing understanding of the idea of user of public housing in Great Britain.

FROM USER TO PRODUCER

The architecturally eventful year of 1961 signals a pivotal moment in the evolution of the discourse of the user. The investigation into collective structures organized around scales of human association launched by Alison and Peter Smithson in their Golden Lane competition project, almost a decade earlier, found its heroic – if somewhat distorted – incarnation in the Park Hill Housing Estate, finished that year in the city of Sheffield. Although Park Hill had

been designed during the late 50's, it already incorporated space standards similar to those that were promoted by the Parker Morris Report, also published in 1961. But a different conception of the user started to gain momentum around this time with the first Dutch publication of John Habraken's *De Draggers en de Mensen* (1961) – translated into English as *Supports* (1972/1999). Although, as acknowledged by its author, the original Dutch version avoids the term 'user', Supports advocates for an open-ended approach to mass housing in which the notion implicitly begets a whole set of new connotations related to political self-determination and aesthetic self-expression.⁽³⁾ For, while the Parker Morris Report – where the term 'user' was similarly absent – had been explicit in stating new conditions for dwellings in a context of greater affluence, it seemed that the identity of the housing recipients had remained blurry. But, how could it be otherwise? Given that the separation between client and occupant demanded that general guidelines for housing were devised, individual identities had to be abstracted into universal needs. In reality, the adoption of the term 'user' in the 60's might well point to something rather different from what it seemed to imply at first. Because if usage referred, as it did in principle, to an instrumental, non-affective relation to an object or work, its application raised the implicit possibility that such usage be understood not just as a function of objective needs but in terms akin to those imposed on by a client, that is, someone endowed with both power and aspirations. It was only a matter of changing the sign of the definition, from objective needs to

subjective aspirations, for a fundamental critique of the passive, objectifying idea of the user to be raised. This is, in fact, the double-edged quality thanks to which the term 'user' came to be seen by many authors as potent, despite its initial associations. Forty (2000), for instance, points toward this emancipatory sense of the term in the writings of Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger and of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre. The latter was openly critical of the straitjacket imposed by the notion of 'needs' as a basis for design (Stanek, 2011) and claimed that only through usage – and deliberate misuse –, could space be appropriated and brought into the realm of subjective social production. Forty explains that the adoption of the term 'user' during the 60's, over and above competing terms such as 'occupant', 'inhabitant', or 'tenant', satisfied three important conditions. First, it offered architecture a source of indeterminacy. According to Forty (2000), by involving itself with a complex, evolving primary material to be investigated, architecture could be liberated from preexisting functionalist formulae. Even as Parker Morris had suggested, this investigation was poised to become a source of innovation for the discipline. Secondly, research of user's needs increased the potential for greater relevance and fitness of a given architectural proposition. Third, and most crucially, Forty (2000) argues that in the context of a welfare State system of production, the user functioned as an alibi that allowed architecture to infiltrate, and to thrive within the conditions of production imposed by the Keynesian economic regime. He claims that the user and the extensive analysis of user's needs allowed architects to believe that notwithstanding their employment by ministries and government, the people whom they truly served were


(2) The idea of the adaptable house is heralded in the report as "one of the most important lines of future research into the development of design and structure" (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1961, p. 9).

(3) The book can be interpreted as a critique of Walter Gropius' *Scope of Total Architecture*, and more generally to the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (J. Medina Warmburg, personal communication, December 29, 2012).

the occupants of the buildings. By privileging 'the user', it could be claimed the expectations within a welfare State democracy for the disempowered to be treated as citizens of 'equal social worth' was being realized. (Forty, 2000, p. 314)

Thus, for architecture, the user was a vehicle that allowed it to define its engagement with the State and with society, not just in instrumental terms, but in its capacity as agent of cultural criticism. By appropriating the figure of the user within its discourse, architecture was able to assert itself as a distinct voice vis-à-vis an increasingly contested checkerboard of political power. Furthermore, the inclusion of the figure of the 'anonymous client' (Bakema, 1962) within the postwar architectural equation renewed its internal tensions by configuring a new problem: How to create an organization and an image in which the individual can find self-affirmation within the collective?

Even if this problem had been announced earlier during the 20th Century – perhaps most famously in Le Corbusier's vernacular insertions in the viaduct building of the 1933 Plan Obus for Algiers – it had been often eclipsed by issues such as standardization of production or the metaphysics of material assembly. In contradistinction to that moment, the 60's made it seem clear that a viable theory of architectural design could not be based on a theory of needs, even if such theory contemplated – as did Abraham Maslow's (1943) influential 'hierarchy' – spiritual and psycho-social dimensions. The notion of the user had to be reframed beyond the passive understanding of the receiver, and in terms that exceeded any merely instrumental conception of architectural space. The proper (i.e.:

affective) expression of the structures of culture and society would then become the primary concern for a socially relevant architecture. 

This paper is an edited excerpt from my PhD dissertation 'In the Name of the User. Social Housing and the Agenda of Architectural Heterogeneity' (FADEU, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2016), where I draw relations between conceptual representations of the user and emblematic actions of design over the period 1950-1980. The dissertation was generously supported by the Elemental and VRI fellowships.

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