What the Future of Affordable Housing Already Looks Like

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An exhibit on selected projects across Europe offers a few ideas for a U.S. audience.

Affordable housing construction seems eternally scant in the U.S. If that ever changes, a new exhibit about the other side of the Atlantic Ocean has a few design ideas to share.

"Social Housing: New European Projects," on exhibit at the Center for Architecture until May 19, features new public housing in France, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the U.K. The projects show a range of ambition and intervention: Near Vienna's Rudolf Bednar Park, Einszueins Architektur designed Wohnprojekt Wien, a co-housing building with gardens and a shared library. In Geneva, Jaccaud Zein Architects and Sergison Bates Architects designed a housing complex that lives within the city's existing urban structures, carving courtyards out of alleyways.

Paul Karakusevic, founder and partner of the U.K. firm Karakusevic Carson Architects, recently published a book about new, innovative social housing projects around which the exhibit is based.

His firm's specialization in social housing and its relationships with local housing councils trace back to the architect's witnessing of what he felt were poor quality efforts in London during the 1960s and '70s. He was also deeply concerned by the lack of affordable housing more recently, and how little was being done about it. "Over the past 20-30 years in all the big cities, we've got a problem because no one's been building or investing for such a long time," Karakusevic says. At last, however, cities are starting to realize that their housing shortages are creating serious problems, and he has seen a slight widening of city housing budgets, particularly in London's boroughs.

Karakusevic finds Vienna particularly ambitious when it comes to social planning. Sixty percent of Viennese residents live in homes that are built, owned, or managed by local municipalities, and Karakusevic is impressed by the way the city and architecture firms pay special attention to creating spaces which foster community. Wohnprojekt Wien, for example, has large, communal kitchen spaces in addition to smaller kitchens within each unit. Karakusevic describes the project as "a utopia."

The 26 featured architecture firms in "Social Housing" focused on designing a neighborhood rather than a single structure. Each housing project was created with attention to railways, roads, and existing buildings as a way to preserve and augment the community. Some projects are also designed to be mixed-use, with schools, workrooms, and retail spaces built in or around them. In Amsterdam's Osdorp neighborhood, a housing project by Mecanoo includes a day-care center, community center, and sports hall, in addition to 51 apartments and 21 single-family homes.

With housing regeneration plans, Karakusevic says, there are often fears that a lot of established residents will simply move if the construction drags on for too long. Renovations, like the one of Bois-le-Prêtre done by Frédéric Druot and Lacaton & Vassal in Paris, avoid this issue by focusing on smaller changes like bringing things up to code and updating the building's facade. These were compromises Karakusevic calls a "sticking plaster" (or what Americans would call a "Band-Aid").

Height—or, rather, a lack thereof—is a striking feature in most of the projects, especially given the associations many Americans have with urban public housing. "I think that's maybe an American thing," notes Karakusevic. "Everyone says 'Paul they're so little!'"

But he insists that the buildings still retain density, some with the capacity for up to 1,000 homes, and explains that most of the residents he worked with were staunchly against high-rises. "They don't mind a mid-rise, 5-12 stories," he said, "but they see high-rises associated with poor maintenance, lifts breaking down, and crime. They think if the council doesn't maintain [the building] it's not the end of the world because they'll only have to walk down four floors, not 25."

Most of the mistrust of public housing, at least in London, Karakusevic said, stems from the fact that the majority of public housing built in the 1960s "wasn't particularly well designed. It was built by private-sector contractors who were just putting things up in order to make the maximum amount of money on the back of the postwar housing crisis." One of the most infamous examples is Aylesbury Estate, which was built in the '60s and been used by British politicians as an embodiment of London's socioeconomic problems (one leader called it "hell's waiting room"). In Karakusevic's experience, ceding control to the private sector is where a project's bills start to add up.

Even conservative politicians find it difficult to argue with the economics of letting local governments control their own housing projects, Karakusevic says. "They go, 'Wow, if the council does it we get minimum 50 percent affordable housing. If the private sector does it we get 15.'" He wants to see federal governments give more financial power to city housing authorities. In London's boroughs, for example, housing councils are hiring their own design teams to oversee everything but the construction. "Because the government has stayed in control, no one's taking any profit out before we start," he says, "unlike with private developers, where even not-for-profits are taking a slice out of the pie." And, because local municipalities are so involved, it enables them to hold building contractors accountable.

"If the public can build again—social housing, intermediate housing, discounted market rent, sale—then that's another big delivery vehicle that will not necessarily compete with the private sector, just augment it," Karakusevic says.

But he does not want to sacrifice cost for quality. "Although there's a crisis, and we need more housing, there's no point building housing if it falls down or fails in 30 years," he said. "Public housing should be seen as public infrastructure. Without investment in public infrastructure, your city starts to fail."

For their Kings Crescent project in Hackney, Karakusevic's firm used high-quality bricks, and put in large windows and a roof deck. Kings Crescent is an ongoing project: residents in the first set of 79 homes moved in September 2017. The first phase has 50 percent of units available for private sale (which, Karakusevic says, helps subsidize the other buildings), retail, and new public space through the creation of courtyards. The buildings were designed to fit into the tonier surroundings of terraced and semi-detached housing.

In the U.S., strides are being taken to create better public housing. South Bronx's Arbor House is an example of recent, community-oriented, government-sponsored affordable housing, and New York City has created new design guidelines with the aim to create quantity with quality. For cities and architects who share in that goal, Europe is offering inspiration.

"A lot of people think we're crazy, to build this quality," said Karakusevic. "But we say if you want good communities, and for people to take pride in their neighborhoods, you can't shortchange people."

About the Author *- Teresa Mathew is an editorial fellow at CityLab.*