HOUSING AND THE SOCIAL

Individual and Group, Street and City

William Mann

WWM

WITHERFORD WATSON MANN
architects

HOUSING AND THE SOCIAL

Individual and Group, Street and City

William Mann

Once again, our cities have growing populations, more transient residents, and abrupt encounters of cultures. The intense pressure of land value continues to leave its imprint on every aspect of the housing stock. Yet the "social" in housing is ever less evident. Yesterday's progressive reaction has hardened into today's constraint – standardised, cheap construction, and random spaces in-between.

Three localised circumstances have given us occasion to imagine housing that is animated by a generous conception of the "social". The extreme failure of a 1970s housing estate in Stonebridge, north-west London, led to broader social ambitions outweighing narrow economic criteria when it was demolished and rebuilt. Secondly, in Poplar, when faced with a judicial process (to expropriate marginal industrial land), vague rhetoric of "regeneration" was sharpened into a requirement of exemplary compliance with the Mayor of London's social and environmental policies. Finally, the siting of a development for over-50s in the backyard of a historic inn in Gistel, West Flanders suggested an open, urban sociability instead of a closed community. In each case, the scale and character of the collective spaces has been central to our conception.

The central pedestrian street in Stonebridge cuts between two parks: the mature landscape of the 19th century ornamental park and the new

Perspective of the proposed street in Stonebridge

green space created at the heart of the recent redevelopment. The pavement slopes quite steeply, rising two metres across the short length of the street; the buildings that line it step more sharply, from four storeys at the bottom to seven at the top. The main rooms of the maisonettes and apartments open with generous windows onto this sociable aspect. Small front gardens take up a third of its width – deep enough to be places of self-expression and contact, as well as buffers for privacy. On its west side, the street is blown wide open by a third landscape: an aqueduct (currently in a pipe) is opened up, feeding a lush interior garden. We have imagined this street as intimate and expansive, a place of encounter between new (private) residents and the rehoused social tenants.

In Poplar, the four residential closes run between the new main street and the river, a wide, wild tidal creek. They are lined on the south side by a four-storey apartment block, and to the north by three-storey terrace houses; they are punctuated by the apartments' stair doorways and bay windows; the rhythms of the apartment block shift between the lower and the upper two floors, reflecting the shift within to smaller flats, but also reinforcing the collective dignity of these blocks. By contrast, the houses are flat-fronted, the rhythms of the first floor windows run through, blurring the demarcation between one house and the next, emphasising the passage to

First floor terrace, Gistel social housing, 2015

the river. We imagine these closes with a character between a street and a courtyard, with a sense of open collectivity. They are everyday spaces that are tributaries to the life of both the creek edge and the main street, slowly linking outwards to shared facilities: the shop, bus stop and small industries of the main street; the east-west street connecting across the urban motorway to market and station, and across the creek, with a pub at the foot of the bridge. In an area dominated by closed enclaves of housing, business and industry, our construction of collective spaces is focused, durable and open-ended.

In Gistel, the courtyard wraps around the rear of the 17th-century inn. It is shared between inn users and residents, softening from sunny cafe terrace to garden by the main run of housing; a narrow passage feeds into one corner, the opposite corner is wide open to the street. The courtyard is a room of brick, paved with purple-red “klinkers”, faced with brickwork painted an earthy grey; the walls are punctuated by two public stairs, and by large wooden door niches at the entry of each ground floor flat. A covered gallery giving access to first floor flats is a large horizontal cut, a wood-lined balcony overlooking the square; its roof is like a cornice to the outdoor room. Intimacy is a given in a small town; the abstracted, unsentimental forms and half-open enclosure give residents a shared focus without explicit convention, offering

Public realm plan for Ailsa Street masterplan, with River Lea in the right.

places of open contact with neighbours and townspeople.

Many fine judgements inform our conception of these collective spaces. Our tactics reflect (but are not limited to) the statement by Reijndorp and Hajer that:

> "designing public domain becomes a question of the stimulation of informal manifestations of diversity and the avoidance of interventions that are intended to make such manifestations impossible."

These include: perceived lines of movement; a sense of social mix; calculations on density; anecdotal observations of body language and perception of scale; the balance of tranquil garden space and hard, active street space. Folds in the building line increase the sense of focus and enclosure, or open spaces outwards; changes in texture or colour suggest transitions to more interior conditions; doorways and balconies are scaled and positioned to see, make eye contact and speak.

Behaviour in collective spaces is formed by convention – though this is both dynamic and negotiable. Designing such spaces is therefore an intervention in the complex fabric of the "social". It is precisely in the external spaces of collective housing that the civic is personally experienced.

Our way of working is empirical but wide-ranging, observational but historically informed,

iterative between the housing and the space it encloses. We have internalised many lessons from Northwest Europe's rich lexicon of forms of urban association – the yards, closes, alleys and tapering streets of London, the *begijnhoven* and *beluiken* of Flanders, the *portieken* of the Netherlands and the *impasses* and *villas* of Paris; and watched and listened carefully where the contrasts of contemporary life are most vivid. In a modern urban society, collectivity must be voluntary rather than controlling, which is why our open spaces are porous, both to outside and from within.

The design of housing seems to us to demand a social rather than a formal imagination, with collective space as its primary task. The imagination required for this question is more narrative than systematic. Like the novelist, we frame the entanglement of individual destinies in the collective structures of the city, whose rules we can bend but not unmake. It is necessary to recognise collective space as a thing worthy of study and construction in itself, in order to rebalance housing construction away from the mechanical production of "units" and from unsustainable individualist dreams. In this sense, the breaks and folds in our housing designs can be considered a symbolic bending of productive forces and of the individual to a generous collective whole.

1 Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp In Search of New Public Domain, Nai Publishers, 2001

2 See for example the excellent Paris Discret, ou le guide des "villas parisiennes", Les Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale no 3, 1979

Witherford Watson Mann started off their collaboration nearly twenty years ago, with a series of walks through the edges of London; since then, they have approached every project as an open-ended enquiry. They have no stock answers for how change will translate into building; instead they find out through dialogue and adaptive design, helping progressive institutions realise their ambitions and reinforce their values.

Whether adapting an old furniture factory for Amnesty or shaping the city plan for London's Olympic quarter, they have always made the most of what is already there, adding judiciously to maintain the distinctiveness of each place but transform its capacity. Their best known building, Astley Castle for the Landmark Trust, won the 2013 RIBA Stirling Prize for its distinctive entwining of past and present.

Recently completed projects include social housing in Belgium, two small art galleries, and public spaces in Bankside, South London. A new generation of projects includes buildings for higher education, for small businesses, and for older people. Witherford Watson Mann distil the complexities of contemporary collectives, of urban sites and public processes into durable, economical solutions that remain open to future change.

Housing and the Social:
Individual and Group, Street and City

First Published in
Lotus147, "New Urban Housing", 2011

Design by
OK-RM, London

Photograph by
Maarten Vanden Abeele

+44(0)20 7613 3113
1–3 Coate Street, London E2 9AG
www.wwmarchitects.co.uk

“Once again, our cities have growing populations, more transient residents, and abrupt encounters of cultures. The intense pressure of land value continues to leave its imprint on every aspect of the housing stock. Yet the ‘social’ in housing is ever less evident. Yesterday’s progressive reaction has hardened into today’s constraint – standardised, cheap construction, and random spaces in-between...”

This short essay considers the relation between housing and public space, and explores the conditions in which it is possible to elevate the design of housing into an imagining of the city.