'Obama, Please Tax Me!'
Architecture and the Politics of Redistribution

Tom Avermaete and Dirk van den Heuvel

The current economic crisis saw a new phenomenon: mega-rich tycoons such as Warren Buffett asked the American president and Congress to raise their taxes, in order to fairly balance the burden. After decades of neoliberal dogma, this was a truly refreshing moment. Arguably, capitalism and the redistribution of wealth are not necessarily opposites, yet it seems as if this had been forgotten during the triumphalist years, which followed the demise of state communism. If the banking crisis of 2008 made one thing clear once again, it is the fact that unruly capitalist development cannot do without state intervention and back-up. This certainly is not a new observation because Henry Ford famously built his empire on this recognition. Hence, it was nothing but appropriate that the Big Three US car companies let themselves be bailed out from utter collapse by the American government as part of managing the collateral damage from the banking crisis.

Even though neoliberal habit tenaciously persists in the global arenas of finance and corporate governance, the ongoing crisis puts the politics of redistribution back on the agenda. The search is for alternative models, such as Noreena Hertz's proposition of a 'Co-op Capitalism' or the still strong Rhineland model of Germany. By the same token, one might revisit the recent history of the welfare state and its redistributive politics, not to dwell in nostalgia, but indeed to look for alternatives to the current rule, by which private debt of banks and multinationals is collectivized, whereas collective assets such as public housing are further privatized. Take, for instance, the Dutch right-wing government, supported by the populist Freedom Party, which only recently decided that all tenants of social housing should have a right to buy, as if nothing was learned from the Thatcher years.

If we are in a period of transition, we would do better to use it to reconsider past models, in order to be prepared for the future opportunity to redefine the balance between state provision, intervention and free market domination. The Western European welfare state as an ideologically highly charged ompromise model may offer food for thought, inspiration, a touchstone to rethink and develop new collectivity models. The welfare state project was a reaction to the processes of modernization in the early twentieth century, and the destruction of two world wars. Caught between American corporate capitalism and Soviet communism, the welfare state project was also an attempt to devise a specific Western European answer to Cold War politics and emerging postcolonial realities.

The welfare state involved a wide array of collective policies and programmes. In most Western European countries this resulted, among others, in the construction of planning institutions and a new bureaucracy, facilitating the redistribution of wealth, knowledge and political power, and implementing new building programmes such as (social) mass housing, cultural centres, schools and universities, but also new energy infrastructure as well as

industries and businesses. This placed architects on the front line of innovative collective models, and initially endowed them with wide-scale praise for their creative work. However, when the political consensus over the welfare state became strained or even collapsed - as notably occurred during the crisis of the 1970s - architects and their work came under sustained attack. They were considered trailblazers of a welfare state that was too bureaucratic, too much one-size-fits-all, and too reformist.

Today, as we look back on the historical phenomenon of the welfare state, we can start to re-assess both how architects positioned themselves within the politics of building, and, crucially, the nature and characteristics of the work that they produced. As a condition of exceptional material production, the welfare state has left a substantial and permanent imprint on the built environment. A vast built legacy of complete cities, neighbourhoods and infrastructure requires an update through strategies of renovation and preservation - both as heritage and as everyday living environments. Much of the current research projects on welfare state architecture and urbanism stem from this need. Initiatives, such as the Twentieth Century Society in England, Docomomo and the Jonge Monumentenproject in the Netherlands, and the recent publications, e.g. those based on research conducted in Belgium and Sweden, are all proof of a renewed interest in this built legacy of the welfare state.

This issue of *Footprint* is based on the conference session 'The European Welfare State Project - Ideals, Politics, Cities and Buildings' as organized by the editors at the first EAHN Conference in Guimarães, Portugal in 2010 and as elaborated in the second EAHN Conference in Brussels, Belgium in 2012 (together with Mark Swenarton). These sessions were proposed as part of the research programme 'Changing Ideals - Shifting Realities' conducted at the TU Delft that aims to further disclose, map and question the architectural

culture of the second half of the twentieth century. It focuses on how the welfare state in Western Europe represents a unique time frame in which manifold shifts within the modernist discourse in architecture and planning were paired with societal changes that established new assemblages between producers, designers, governments, clients, builders and users.

This selection of papers illustrates that these new assemblages were multivalent, but often also ambiguous or even contradictory. The welfare state model was not only perceived as a straitjacket that resulted in unfreedom for individual exploration and endeavour. It was also an infrastructure that enabled the local and accommodated individual projects. Just as the welfare state model was characterized by 'repressive tolerance' and unnecessary uniformity, there was also room to manoeuvre, depending on specific contexts, particular alliances and local conditions. In this issue of *Footprint*, Lucy Creagh questions in her paper the allowed freedom of the emancipation model of the new town of Vällingby in Sweden. Sven Sterken delivers a particular case study on Belgium, demonstrating how the office of Groupe Structures was caught by the logic of productivity and a first concern for local community shifted to rationalist mass production output. Pierre Chabard discusses the paradox of the freedom for architectural experiment under authoritative French state planning, and the introduction of regressive, orthodox urban models under a new fragmented and hybrid regime of a diverse collection of government bodies and private initiative. Pedro Baía and Mark Swenarton bring positive models: Baía expounds on how modernization and the ideas of Team 10 were considered a way out of the deadlock under the Salazar dictatorship; and Swenarton demonstrates how the possibilities of individual action within government bodies resulted in a most specific series of modernist housing ensembles of an innovative typology.

In retrospect, one can identify New Brutalism and structuralism among the foremost new formations within the architectural discourse and practice of the period. However, at the same time these two labels were never clearly, unambiguously defined. Part of the conceptual confusion is the critical engagement or unwilling involvement of architects with the project of the welfare state. Groups like Team 10 fiercely criticized (aspects of) the welfare state system, while building under its very conditions. A complication in assessing the exact qualities of the built legacy of those years arises from the very different national and local contexts in which welfare state policies were developed, as well as from the variety of intellectual and disciplinary contexts that engendered architecture. Such complication brings an enrichment that allows us to view the perceived uniformity of the hybrid welfare state models in a new light. At the intersections of building practice, architectural viewpoints, national and local cultural contexts, a nuanced image of welfare state architecture emerges.