Review Article
The Elusiveness of Welfare State Specificity
Tahl Kaminer

The welfare state

The recently published anthology *Architecture and the Welfare State*, edited by Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete and Dirk van den Heuvel, includes an array of intricate vignettes, linked via threads of common interest and impetus.[1] The anthology brings to the fore many under- or unacknowledged efforts by architects operating within the institutions of the welfare state, often embodying within their own work or practices the institutional worldview, as well as the types of negotiation required in the process of realising their ambitions. Its focus is not the 'heroic' modernism of the leading members of the movement, but the 'everyday' architecture that, at the end of the day, due to its proliferation and ubiquity, shaped the European built environment.

The anthology attempts to redeem the most vilified form of architectural modernism: social housing, often produced in tight relation to maligned planning and technocratic policies. The anthology is thus posited first and foremost against the postmodern critique of such architecture, though it also forgoes the redemption of an aesthetic form of modernism by Eisenman, Hadid, Meier and others, and counters the rejection of planning and large-scale development by the contemporary participatory movement.[2] It is also posited against a consumerist 'modernism' (often simply referred to as 'modern'). Consequently, the anthology implicitly opposes the systematic destruction of this architecture as well as the methodical demolition of the welfare state itself.

The argument presented in *Architecture and the Welfare State* is communicated already in the choice of title. The highly significant omission of 'modernism' infers the intention to avoid assimilating the discussion in the book into a familiar narrative of modernist development and dissipation that privileges an 'internal' and often aesthetic discourse on architecture. The preference of 'welfare state' to 'post-war' infers the desire to associate the architecture in question not just to an era but to a specific form of society. Yet the editors also avoid a title such as 'The Architecture of the Welfare State', which would reflect full commitment to such a thesis.[3] The mixture of courage and hesitation evident in the title adequately describes the aggregate position sketched by the diverse contributions available here – an attempt to pierce through the (ideological-specialist) walls separating 'architecture' from 'politics' and 'society' and to reach sharp and clear conclusions, contrasting the desire to remain academic, neutral and distantiated, and to avoid universalisms by focusing on particularities.

The task of the introductory article by the editors of such a volume is to provide context, to offer the necessary shared definitions, and to generally form the meta-argument that provides coherence and consistency, uniting the fragments into a whole. 'The aim [of the book] is to investigate the complex kinship between the welfare state and the built environment,' write the editors.[4] The anthology was produced via a series of symposia, and the editors react in their introduction to comments and questions

collated by Adrian Forty during the symposia, available in the book's appendix. One of the comments highlights the question of the limits of the territory covered by the term 'welfare state'; in particular, the relation of the welfare state to colonialism, the Cold War and the Eastern bloc. Colonialism and the Cold War served as 'externalities' to the welfare state and were consequently vital to its self-identity. The relationship both of these have with the welfare state is dealt with in the introduction and in the volume itself, yet the issue of the Eastern bloc is mostly disregarded.

This matters, because the editors strive to identify an architecture that is specific to the welfare states of Western Europe, produced by and for a specific society. A necessary step in achieving such a correlation is to identify major differences in the social structures, economies, institutional cultures and architecture of Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the USA and elsewhere. Or, in other words, to identify the particularity of all aspects of the welfare state itself. The volume appears to undermine such a case. It underlines the diversity of welfare states and emphasises international exchanges and influences.

A few important ingredients of the welfare state do not receive the attention they deserve in the introduction or in the book: Fordism, Keynesian economics, and *planism*. While Fordism was an organisational theory which emphasised efficiency and productivity, *planism*, developed in parallel in the 1930s by Belgian Henri de Man and the French Groupe X-Crise, was a technocratic theory which identified the means to plan society: a form of social engineering, via governmental policies and procedures. Likewise, Keynes' general theory was a product of the 1930s and a reaction to the 1929 crisis.

All three theories were put into practice globally to different degrees – in Europe, America, Asia and Africa. In this sense, the specificity of the welfare state appears difficult to pin down. Keynesian economics, however, is arguably the key to the particularity of the welfare states.[5] While Keynesian theory and policies were implemented circa 1960 in the United States by neo-Keynesian economists such as John Kenneth Galbraith, and by Khrushchev in the USSR, it was the West European welfare state which perfectly epitomised the 'spirit' of Keynes' theory. In the laissez-faire dominated United States, just as in the highly planned economy of the USSR, the implementation of Keynesian economics and its usefulness was selective and partial. Keynes' theory was aimed, arguably, at the type of mix of capitalism and planned economy achieved in Western Europe in the post-war years. The intertwining of a liberal democratic political process, capitalism, and a partially planned economy, mark the specificity of the welfare state.

Such a description identifies the differences between the welfare state, the Eastern bloc model and the United States as differences of degree. With Keynes' theory, Fordism and *planism* were assimilated into a global hegemonic order; differences of degree rather than substance are all that can identify the welfare state, yet these differences are, arguably, more substantial than those that separate the disparate welfare states. All this may seem like hair-splitting, but it touches upon the issue that is so vital to the book's argument; that is, the specificity of the welfare state, without which there cannot be a specific welfare state architecture.

Another issue worth questioning is the description throughout the book of the interwar period as a 'proto-welfare state' era.[6] While the importance of the era for the formation of the post-war welfare state is beyond doubt, a counter-argument emphasises the shortcomings of the social democratic governments and policies of this era in actually implementing, in a consistent way, any of the key aspects of the later welfare state. The social democratic parties

that came to power in France, Britain, Germany, Sweden and elsewhere were significantly different from their successors in the post-war period. They were positioned in an ambiguous place between 'evolutionary socialism' and revolution: on the one hand, their not-so-distant split from the Communist parties meant that their ethos was still Marxist and revolutionary, and that they fiercely opposed capitalism; on the other hand, they had become the political mouthpiece of the sectarian agenda of the trade unions, channelling the demands for higher wages and job security via 'bourgeois democracy'.[7] The economic, social and political programmes of these parties in the interwar years were extremely limited. The major proposal was nationalisation, but beyond a few minor and isolated cases, examples of nationalisation did not take place in European social democratic-run countries in the 1920s. So, while the interwar years evinced meaningful experimentations in social housing, planning and in other policies, in the absence of a rigorous economic or technocratic theory, the effects were necessarily very limited.

As mentioned above, the stated aim of the anthology is to discuss architecture via the particular lens of the welfare state. The anthology assembles an impressive set of contributors who have already demonstrated their prowess in previous endeavours. Each chapter opens with a general discussion of the relevant context, outlining the characteristics or key moments in the development of the local provision of welfare before investigating a particular case. Each writer brings his or her own approach to the question of the relation of architecture to society, offering the reader an overview of such arguments.

Architecture and society

The symbolic relation of architecture to society, or, alternatively, a shared worldview shaping both, appears in a number of chapters here. Hilde Heynen and Janina Gosseye, in discussing recreation and leisure buildings in post-war Flanders, point out that

'modern architecture['s] celebrated principles such as sobriety, rationality and functionality [...] were in line with the equality, openness and social justice aimed for by socialist organizations.'[8] Eve Blau attributes symbolic meanings to Red Vienna, which merge with political intentions. While the symbolic, associative and representational relation is often considered a 'weak link', it nevertheless operates on a purely ideological or even political level.[9]

Less common but with its own history is the argument for the existence of a direct relation between architectural typology, urban morphology and society. Here, it appears in the chapter by Heynen and Gosseye and is a major feature in Eve Blau's. Social forms assume architectural and urban form, and a direct correlation is established between the social and spatial organisation of society.

Another means of identifying the relation of architecture to society is pursued by studying the assimilation of ideals, concepts and theories into state policies and procedures that shape architecture and the city, or directly into architectural discourse and practice. In Lukasz Stanek's chapter, theories that were developed as critiques of the state by radical sociologists end up being absorbed into the state, mutilated and 'technocratised' – yet at the same time they shape the built environment and society. Dirk van den Heuvel follows the struggles of Team 10, and particularly those of Piet Blom, to implement Karl Popper's 'Open Society' in architectural and urban form.

The issue of international 'importation' of ideas stands at the centre of a number of chapters, attesting to the global character of the diverse exchanges. Caroline Maniaque-Benton traces French architects' fascination with the American counterculture in the 1970s, describing the manner in which ideas regarding self-build, individual autonomy and low-energy consumption were imported and adapted via media and realisation. Also tracking the 'importation'

of ideas is Tom Avermaete, who follows ideas and practices that were developed by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1930s, borrowed by ATBAT in North Africa, and which finally arrived in France in the late 1950s. Mark Swenarton studies the idea of 'Englishness' in the gravitation from high-density high-rise to high-density low-rise in the work of Patrick Hodgkinson. By closely following architecture, he constantly keeps 'the cultural' at arm's length, with the question of 'Englishness' appearing as a strictly architectural issue. Michelle Provoost studies the importation of Western urban planning models to Ghana in the design of the new town of Tema, whereas Miles Glendinning discusses the transformation in Singapore and Hong Kong of British ideas regarding mass housing, highlighting the impact of local political concerns and the particular conditions of both colonies in shaping policies and their outcome.

A more direct relation between architecture and society than the symbolic or the transposition of ideas is established by following the decisions that determine a project, the manner in which diverse agents take part in a negotiation within or between institutions, and how the outcomes are never predetermined. Nicholas Bullock studies how the housing and regeneration policies of the London Borough of West Ham and its successor, Newham, 'went wrong', whereas Simon Pepper, by studying discussions within the London County Council (LCC) regarding an ambitious housing estate, attempts to uncover the unwitting emergence of the much disliked high-rise housing policy of the 1960s. Helena Mattsson, in her study of the building of the new town of Skärholmen, investigates the various agencies involved in determining the town and the exchanges held between them, demonstrating the corporatist character of the Swedish welfare state by identifying the leading role played by interest groups representing the private sectors of commerce, roads and the building industry. Luca Molinari outlines De Carlo's Terni and Aymonino's

Gallaratese as two distinct reactions to the Italian state's attempt to shape urban development and housing via its laws and regulations: one which is first and foremost political, and the other which is primarily architectural in its expression. In their turn, Heynen and Gosseye address the institutional conditions that shaped the commissioning of leisure centres in Flanders.

Taken together, these diverse approaches to the relationship between architecture and society construct a bigger picture, a totality. They attest to the complexity and multifaceted character of such a relationship, as well as to the intricate correlation of the welfare state itself to the architecture it produced. The overall impression is of an architecture umbilically connected to the society that produced it, and to a degree that cripples Daniel Bell's (postmodern) thesis of a disjuncture between society and culture.[10]

Dissipation

The demise of the architecture of the welfare state, or rather the demise of both the architecture and the welfare state, is an issue that many of the contributors address. In particular, the bewildering change of tone in the media, which around 1965 was mostly supportive of the endeavour, but within only a few years had turned on the welfare state's provision of housing, attacking it with vitriol and venom. The proximity in time between unconditional support and total rejection is the most astonishing aspect here and the most difficult to interpret. While much of the critique of post-war social housing is embedded in the critiques associated with 1968, their sudden eruption in the media is inexplicable. The generational change, which also meant the replacement of deference towards experts with a more critical mindset, explains the change rather than its speed. Florian Urban, in his chapter about the Märkisches Viertel housing estate in Berlin, highlights a lingering question: to what extent did the media actually represent public opinion and, more particularly, the

opinion of the residents of the despised estates? The sociologist Richard Sennett has commented that 'the New Left critique was my own, until in the late 1960s I began interviewing white, working-class families in Boston […]. Far from being oppressed by bureaucracy, these were people anchored in solid institutional realities. Stable unions, big corporations, relatively fixed markets oriented them.'[11]

The students and workers demonstrating in Paris in May 1968 voiced very different critiques. While the students primarily demanded freedom, spontaneity, creativity and self-realisation, denouncing not only 'capitalism' but also the state and bureaucracy (hence, 'the artistic critique of society'), the workers demanded higher wages and job stability ('the social critique of society'). This disparity of critiques reflects class as much as generational differences. It was as a response to the latter critique, dominant since the late nineteenth century, that the welfare state was formed. Its housing was likewise a response to the social critique. At the end of the 1960s, the fissure between the demands was made visible, and with the ascent of the critique voiced by the students and the dissipation of that of the workers came the demise of the welfare state and its diverse projects, including housing. The media seems to have been slow at first in channelling the demands of the students. Was the shift in the media's position driven by the 'baby boomer' generation entering jobs in the media, or by savvy editors identifying a shift in the public mood? The ferocity and suddenness of the media attack merits a study in its own right. In any case, the chapters that address the attacks on the welfare state and on modernist housing and planning also raise the question of whether the media is necessarily the measure of public opinion.

What was, then, the architecture of the welfare state? Judging by the number of chapters devoted to social housing, it appears, unsurprisingly perhaps, that mass social housing stood at the centre of the welfare state's intervention in the built environment. More than simply a response to an acute shortage in housing after the Second World War, mass social housing was a key aspect of 'rectifying' society, of producing an equitable society. A means of addressing the social 'content' of the built environment. The provision of universal housing by government as a response to the social critique of society was necessarily burdened by the direct involvement of the government in financing, commissioning and managing the effort; in effect, often limiting 'architecture' in the process – that is, as long as 'architecture' is conceived in beaux arts terms as an artistic field of creativity rather than a field of social production and reproduction.

Yet while it is easy in all this to identify the particular architecture of the era's mass housing and that of planned economies in general, the specificity of welfare state housing in Western Europe remains elusive. The post-war mass housing of West and East Berlin in some cases appears more similar than the mass housing in post-war London and Hamburg, complicating matters with the incorporation of cultural and historic differences beyond the question of welfare state specificity. The elusiveness of a welfare state architecture may be reason enough to prefer *Architecture and the Welfare State* to *The Architecture of the Welfare State* as a title, and ought to provide the motivation to continue the study of post-war architecture in coming years.

Notes

1. Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete and Dirk van den Heuvel, eds., *Architecture and the Welfare State* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2015).
2. See, among others, Maros Krivy, Tahl Kaminer, eds., The Participatory Turn in Urbanism, *Footprint* 13 (Autumn 2013).
3. To qualify the comment, it is necessary to point out the proliferation of the use of the word 'architecture' to

describe the design or structure of systems and institutions well beyond the strict disciplinary sense means that 'the architecture of the welfare state' could be understood as referring to the structure of the welfare state.

4. Swenarton, Avermaete and Van den Heuvel, 'Introduction', in *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 2.

5. The major difference between the Eastern and Western blocs was, of course, their political systems, but here Western Europe and the United States are no longer differentiated.

6. Swenarton, Avermaete and Van den Heuvel, 'Introduction', in *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 10.

7. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: Verso, 2001 [1985]), 73.

8. Hilde Heynen and Janina Gosseye, 'The Welfare State in Flanders: De-Pillarization and the Nebulous City', in *Architecture and the Welfare State*, 56.

9. See, for example, Meyer Schapiro's critique of Emil Kaufmann's associative correlation of architecture and society, in Anthony Vidler, 'The Ledoux Effect: Emil Kaufmann and the Claims of Kantian Autonomy', *Perspecta* 33 [Mining Autonomy issue] (2002): 23.

10. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996 [1976]).

11. Richard Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2006), 6.

Biography

Tahl Kaminer is Lecturer in Architectural Theory and Design at the University of Edinburgh. He published in 2011 the monograph *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation* (Routledge), and co-edited the three volumes *Urban Asymmetries, Critical Tools, and Transformer Houses*. Tahl is currently completing a manuscript for a new monograph, scheduled for publication in 2017.