

INTRODUCTION

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I sometimes think I would like to write
a book
An entire book about time
About its existence
About how past and future
Form an eternal present

Evgeni Vinokurov.

It's almost a hundred years since Spain's Economic Housing Act (1911) was passed, which represented an attempt to regulate access to decent housing and to provide solutions to the problems of health and hygiene created by the influx of vast numbers of workers from the countryside to industrialised cities from the late 19th century onwards. The process of turning housing into a social asset, starting from its origins rooted in philanthropy, the trade unions and the issue of hygiene, and which included socialist utopias and bourgeoisie industrial proposals, as well as the theories and trials of the Modern Movement prior to the Second World War, the post-war reconstruction period, the new cities and housing estates of the 1960s and 1970s, and the later change of direction towards the consolidation of the city, reveals a vision of collective housing and the idea of the construction of the city as a social act. Looking back at the history of social housing over the last century provides us with an opportunity to refresh our memory and to remember the struggles and efforts of generations of inhabitants to create the cities we live in today, in an attempt to procure a habitat for all sectors of society, in a less segregated, more social and sustainable city, and part of a rational organisation of the territory. Such efforts have produced spaces characterised by coexistence and democracy, but also socially degraded districts and over-developed and spoilt peripheral areas and territory. Against this background of achievements, struggles and trial and error, access to housing continues to be a problem for the lower-income classes; the difference being that whilst a hundred years ago the aspiration was for housing that complied with a set of minimum living conditions, today the ideal is a comfortable home built by property developers, the characteristics of which will depend on consumers' income level.

This book aims to provide an insight into examples of public housing built over a hundred-year period in Galicia, offering an overview of the complexities involved in creating subsidised housing, and to pay tribute to those who saw housing as a social asset, striving to make it accessible to all segments of the population, as well as acting as a means for reflecting on our own nature and the legacy that has been passed down to us. It also offers a fleeting look at several of the reasons behind the transformation of our habitat and highlights the need for housing of those persons with lower incomes, criticising the errors that have prevented us from providing universal access to housing. In addition, it assesses the built city, the territory and its relationship with housing, as well as providing an introduction to the changes in collective social housing, and an appraisal of collective residences as the optimum solution for organising collective habitats in relation to the city.

In Galicia, and despite its diaspora, the relatively reduced size of its cities and its lower levels of industrialisation, the problems experienced by residents and new inhabitants in accessing housing in the region's towns and cities mirror those of the rest of Spain, although this is not the case in terms of the solutions offered and their contexts, which vary considerably, even between the various Galician cities. In the late 19th century rising population numbers in the cities were accompanied by the increasing density of their inner areas; the later expansion of the city boundaries, which in some cases was represented by the actual demolition of the city walls, resulted in new areas springing up outside the inner core. This solution provided housing for the bourgeoisie, but failed to resolve the housing needs of the working classes. It was within this context that the state first began to assume responsibility for the construction of economical housing; the acceptance of housing as a common asset arose from the needs and desires of the working class for improvement, and from fears for the urban and social degradation of the bourgeois city. The influences of working class housing built elsewhere in Europe are clearly in evidence; they tended to be single family units with a back yard or garden, standing on the outskirts of the existing towns and cities. Whilst the amount of housing of this type built was relatively small, the turn of the century would bring with it the functional and constructive definition of the dwelling, of housing seen as a social phenomenon, with attempts at reducing costs, simplifying the building elements, creating standardised formats and rationalising the building process. The early decades of the 20th century saw a sharp rise in population numbers in the region's cities and the transformation of their layout, characterised by the growth of residential suburbs around the urban centres. This rational approach to building would be accompanied by the organisation of the domestic space in social housing, and a shift in the trends that accompanied the early housing acts, which considered this type of housing from merely hygienic and financial perspectives,

towards the search for comfort. The reflection on the domestic space in social housing would later impact on the design of all types of housing and would contribute to the appearance of blocks of flats for social use.

After the Spanish Civil War and the immediate post-war period, the issue of social housing would be largely ignored until the mid 1950s. Despite the precarious nature of this period, many architects focused on coming up with a definition of the minimum housing requirements, experimenting in Madrid's satellite towns and are therefore responsible for the rational nature of the minimum proposals that appeared at this time. An urgent need meant that new housing was built in practically all Galicia's towns and boroughs, characterised by its repetitive nature and lack of public spaces, in blocks of apartments or terraces of single family units. These medium density interventions, which were generally built on the outskirts of the urban centre, were superimposed onto the existing road networks or on rural networks, thereby failing to provide us with a new urban model. These were isolated and scattered interventions, which failed to blend in with the towns and their surroundings, as they marked a sharp breakaway from traditional architecture; their reduced size also prevented the appearance of new districts. From the 1960s onwards, the inability of the State to resolve the lack of subsidised housing left this question in the hands of private developers. This is a time of "development", dominated by speculation and lax controls on urban planning and which in Galicia left behind a legacy of fragmented cities with problems of social integration, yet also the most singular examples of 20th century subsidised housing, characterised by the development of large housing estates and interventions surrounded by perimeter road networks providing access to blocks or towers of flats, and traffic-free public spaces. Places which the blatant lack of social awareness of the authorities turned into large marginal urban structures. Property speculators took advantage of this situation to obtain vast profits, placing their business interests above all others, simplifying the designs, reducing architecture to a degree of banality and leaving behind constructions that could be termed as "storage units for people", in which habitability considerations were essentially ignored. At this time, architects had no say in the construction of towns and cities; many accepted the conditions imposed by the developers, which resulted in a decline in social discourse and an absence of criticism, as well as a sense of uniformity, where the overriding factor is the unit for sale, and where the market decides exactly what people want.

During the 1980s and 1990s, and following the arrival of democracy in Spain, the approach of the authorities towards housing centred on the need for land and private financing. Only a very small amount of public housing was built, and much of it ended up on the private property market. Three and four year plans were introduced to regulate the building industry, designed to maintain owner-occupied housing by providing financial aid for investment, improving building standards by introducing design regulations, which aimed to consolidate and renew cities, as well as restoring historic quarters. Much of the autonomous government's intervention during this period was focused on plots of land in small boroughs in the provinces of Lugo and Ourense. Current proposals for the coming years are focused on diversifying the supply in order to satisfy the demands of all social sectors, including both owner and tenant occupied housing and new and restored constructions, in sites on the immediate outskirts of the larger cities, in rural areas and in small towns.

One of the most striking aspects that this overview reveals is the gradual privatisation of a social asset such as housing. This fact should lead all those with responsibilities for land and housing – inhabitants, promoters, politicians and experts – to reflect on the use to which the land is put, on the type of cities we are creating, the types of dwellings they contain, and the access to housing of their inhabitants. Architects ceased to have a say in the decisions adopted regarding improvements to the habitability of our surroundings – the land and the cities – quite some time ago. For this reason, today the debate focuses on objectual and spatial rather than social issues; it is reduced to commercialising images and forms, which create a false illusion of new forms of modernity amongst the collective imagination. How many of today's leading architects are calling for a social debate? How many of them have designed subsidised or social housing? How many have contributed urban models designed to improve informal urban areas? How many have challenged the issue of property speculation? This period has seen the appearance of cities that are costly to maintain, land and housing policies have been formulated, a vast amount of housing has been built – in some cases excessive– yet despite all this there are still people who are unable to access housing. We form part of a global consumerism that is reinforced by the continuation of urban planning patterns, yet which should not force us to admit that architecture, and housing in particular, represent an ephemeral consumer asset. It is essential to learn from the past in order not to repeat the same mistakes, and to learn from its positive aspects: the need for housing for all will always form part of that eternal present.