L’habitatge torna a ser un tema de debat arquitectònic. Feia anys que no hi havia una eferescència semblant. Ni tan generalitzada: fins i tot països amb una llarga i ininterrompuda tradició d’habitatge col·lectiu, com els Païses Baixos, reprenen aquesta discussió com si encara ho tinguessin tot per fer. Queden enrere aquelles veus fosques que anunciaven que amb l’habitatge col·lectiu no es podia fer arquitectura. Ara sembla que, després d’un període de renúncia, l’arquitectura vol tornar a tenir el paper propositiu que havia abandonat i està disposada a replantegar-se moltes cases. Aquí, però, persisteix la rutina de tipologies i models recreats ad nauseam per promoters i administracions. L’excusa és un futur suposadament sense problemes i un problem-free futur i una dormant!,...housing with imaginació i idees que, mentre resolgués els problemes actuals i que a lhora es projectés cap al futur. Haurien de possibilitar propostes prou flexibles per adaptar-se a situacions de les quals ara tan sols podem entreveure una gran diversitat. Dins el debat actual per repensar l’habitatge hi ha quatre consideracions que voldria fer aquí. Implicita en aquests quatre aspectes, existeix la qüestió que entenc que és la primordial: la del programa de l’habitatge, és a dir, la de com es pensa la seva organització espacial. Potser es podria abordar el programa directament obrint una (vella) discusió sobre la tipologia, però crec que en la situació actual no té sentit parlar de tipus sense abans intentar d’entendre les (noves) condicions en què s’ha de prodir.

debate. 

Alter-
directa o indirecta- amb l’habitatge d’una manera imaginativa i amb una visió que
solving current problems, look to the future. They ought to lay the ground for proposals which are flexible enough to adapt to situations which at present can only be guessed at in their wide diversity.

The current debate existing around the rethinking of housing is based on four considerations I would like to deal with here. The question which I consider to be vital is implicit in these four aspects: the brief for housing—that is, how its spatial organization is conceived. The brief could be dealt with directly by opening up an (old) discussion as to typology, but I think that given the present situation there is no point talking of type without first trying to understand the (new) conditions in which it has to come about.

1. OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

It is 25 years since the last explosion of proposals which aimed to revitalize housing. A few were carried out, but many others got no further than the paper they were written on, and had no effective influence. The latter may serve as a point of reference, but there is no point bringing them out of cold storage now, or of thinking that there is nothing to be said about housing that was not said at that time. The social, economic and technical conditions are not the same, but the will or the need to imagine different ways of living continue. Historically, however, any attempt to change housing conditions has only met with success if it responded to an existing need, be it explicit or no. In this respect, there were both contributions made by specific architects and more or less spontaneous, anonymous processes. The adaptation of Wright’s domestic proposals to a certain mentality, or the conversion of New York lofts were American examples of both kinds. In spite of everything, sometimes experimentation is spoken of as though it were a necessity in itself, as though it were a way of endowing housing with a cultural plus which it seemed incapable of getting any other way.1 The spaces of the housing unit as such have changed little throughout the centuries, but there has been a definite evolution in their organization. A recurrent theme when talking about new ways

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of understanding the house is the minimal definition of space and brief. With this kind of proposal, though, the desired experimentation or cultural plus are only to be found in relation with certain technical decisions or external design in the field of engineering or facade design — ultimately a very limited contribution. This means turning our backs on any research into the quality of space or potential lay-out understood as the mechanism capable of joining together different aspects which go to define the housing unit. The search for a certain desirable flexibility need not necessarily lead to a renunciation of intentional configuration of spaces. On the contrary, I think this has to be the main aim of any proposal if it is to be significant.

2. TECHNOLOGY IS INSIGNIFICANT (AND PERSUASIVE)

Another recurrent idea is the supposed need to adapt architecture to the technical possibilities of the day. This may be true in the case of some construction typologies, but in the usual housing typologies it is rather more doubtful. Of course, the structural model may condition the type of lay-out or the inclusion of electronic applications may make for a reconsideration of certain questions, but the expression that these applications will depend on the project decisions, not on a series of theoretical qualities intrinsic in these techniques. Basing the interest of a proposal on its innovative technique is no big deal these days. Technology is constantly offering plausible new possibilities and is subject to an evolution which sees it age and become revitalized a little more every day, losing significance and becoming just a means to an end, if it was ever any more than that. Technology is in fact becoming increasingly more transparent and flexible, invisible and universal, and its logic lies in being capable of adapting to a plethora of highly diverse situations. It can be enlisted at the service of any idea, without necessarily affecting its form.

Nor can limiting the values of a proposal to its technology ensure the quality of the results or its suitability for the problems it has to solve. Structural proposals like Le Corbusier’s Domino structure or Mies van der Rohe’s concrete office building, often cited as an example of technical application to architecture, are no more than schemes with a very limited content which call for detailed work, a project, to acquire meaning. We can see these schemes materialized in the most banal buildings of our city outskirts, created on the basis of logics which have little to do with interest in the quality of built space. But many housing proposals which use innovations of this kind give the impression that they are not concerned with rethinking architecture as much as expressing their own material condition as a page objects.

When this type of technology is made to play the role of defining the character of a building, it is often reduced to a caricature of itself. And, like all caricatures, its features are exaggerated to give them a significance which they would not otherwise have and which, surely, they need not have.
La normativa pot tenir un paper molt positiu a definir, ajudar o potenciar aquestes expectatives, millorant les condicions de vida. Però també pot ser una camisa de força o, piñor, un instrument pervers d’espèculació i d’exploitació. No es tracta de discutir la conveniència de l’existència de normes, sinó de fer-ne la revisió. Una revisió que, sobretot, defineix l’habitatge d’acord amb uns criteris actuals.

Altres deu anys, la nostra societat, incloent-hi els arquitectes, ha assumit implicitament els paràmetres definits per la normativa d’habitatge social iniciada els anys quaranta. Uns paràmetres que ens semblen universals però que de fet són molt conjunturals i locals. Últimament comencen a aixecar-se veus contra la concepció d’habitatge definida en aquestes normes, basada en mínims dimensionals i en una idea obsoleta de societat, però sorprèn que hi siga estat tant d’any funcionant gairebé sense alternatives i que hagi inflert fins i tot en la promoció privada i en la definició de les ordenances municipals.

No cal ara escatar les raons d’això, sinó assenyalar alguns efectes negatius que ha tingut aquesta assumpció general d’unes normes concretes. El més evident és la fossilització minimitzada i desvirtuada del programa búnques del XIX, que es va repetit com a model únic. Un altre de més subtil és que, en fixar les dimensions i les peces del programa, aquesta normativa deficient ha esdevingut alhora un cànon de disseny i un obstacle que cal vèncer. Ha acabat substituït o obstaculitzant el fet de projectar, i sembla clar que aquesta no ha de ser la seva funció. La normativa hauria d’ajudar a produir bona arquitectura sense obligar a fer malabarismes. En els millors casos, de la necessitat es fa virtut i s’acaba valorant la gosadia o l’habilitat del projectista en manipular-la com un plus de qualitat, quan no és sinó una rèmora que limita l’abast de les propostes.

El piñor, de tota manera, és que la normativa s’ha generat amb uns criteris que, a més de no fer difícil la mala arquitectura, permeten la seva justificació, consagrant com a millors arquitectes als ulls dels promotors aquells que saben i volen esprèmir-la al màxim.

¿La qualitat de l’habitatge? Aquest és un concepte que els nostres codis no contemplen.

3. NORMA LA DOUCE

Norms have to be related to the expectations of a society. Somehow, they have to respond to the aspirations and concerns of the people for whom they are intended. Norms can play a very positive role in defining, helping or promoting these expectations, improving standards of living. But they can also be a straitjacket or, worse still, a perverse instrument of speculation and exploitation. Not least, they do not define housing according to present-day criteria.

Over the years, our society —architects included— has implicitly accepted the parameters set out by social housing norms created in the forties: parameters which seem to us to be universal but which are in fact very local and of a time. Recently voices are starting to be raised against the conception of housing defined by these norms, based on minimal dimensions and an obsolete idea of society, but it comes as a surprise that it has worked for so many years almost without alternatives and that it has even influenced private developers and the definition of municipal ordinances.

There is no need here to discuss the reasons for this; instead I will point out some of the negative effects of this general taking-on-board of specific norms. The most obvious is the minimized, distorted fossilization of the nineteenth century middle-class brief which is repeated over and over as a unique model. Another, more subtle, is that in spite of setting the dimensions and parts of the brief, this deficient norm has, at the same time, become a cannon of design and an obstacle to be surmounted. It has ended up substituting or placing obstacles in the way of the fact of planning, and it seems plain that this should not be its function. Norms should help to produce good architecture without the obligation of performing conjuring acts. In the best of cases, necessity is turned into a virtue and the planner’s daring or skill in manipulating it into added quality is valued, when it is merely a hindrance to the scope of the plan.

What is worse, in any case, is that the norms were created according to criteria which, as well as not making poor architecture difficult, justify it, defying. In the eyes of the developers, those architects who know how to and want to squeeze it dry.

The quality of housing? This is one concept which our codes do not consider.

4. PLANNING SOME (WITH REMISSIO)

We urgently need a redefinition of housing norms, but it is not enough to attempt to set flexible, quality criteria if planning does not define implantations in keeping with these aims.

In our towns, we exalt models of suburbanization of fabrics which are hardly compatible with the types of historical settlement or even with an idea of public space as a place for the social dynamic. The proliferation of districts of terraced housing on city outskirts, or the indiscriminate mix of typologies in unusual locations, surely responds to the demands of the property market and a particular way of understanding certain aspirations relating to the environment and standards of living. But given the results, it does not appear to be the best way of continuing to
build a city. This defeatism in the face of supposedly inelastic market forces has produced ill-defined dormitory districts with spaces of absolutely nil quality and with many of the shortcomings normally attributed to the residential estates of the sixties and seventies. All in all, today it seems to be impossible to generate more urban space with intensity and identity.

But what are the possible alternatives to this clumsy planning we are having to endure? Some reactions deny the advantages of planning growth and putting forward systems which are open to a supposed capacity of interpretation of each specific condition of implantation. I do not think that a neo-picturesque approach such as this can ensure the quality of the result in all its complexity. Certainly, all the urban conditions for any situation cannot be established beforehand, less so at a time when the very idea of public space is in crisis. But certain basic premises do have to be defined, such as the mix or intensification of uses, or the densification of settlement, to allow the creation of surroundings which are capable of taking in a habitability which we do not want to end with the domestic limits of the home.

Notes
1. On this subject see the last issue of Quaderns, particularly pages 72 onwards.
2. The chain of absurdities defining Spanish social housing norms and their populist origins are lucidly reviewed in Justo Iñaki’s article “Entre ayer y mañana”, published by the V-VII M Projects Department of ETSAB. In order to understand how little our authorities want to face up to reality, it is important to explain that this text, which was initially commissioned as an introduction to the book-compilation of recent constructions of the Instituto de la Vivienda de Madrid, was finally taken out of the publication for its lack of apologetic tone.

Editor’s note: The article by Enric Massip which appeared in page 310 of issue 307-309 of Quaderns should have been entitled “Del 75 al 05” instead of the published title.

Enric Massip: Architect, he is currently professor in a design department of the Architecture School of Barcelona. He is now working on the contemporary transformation of housing programmes. He held a scholarship of the Japanese Government and realised an investigation about architectural space in Japan at the Tokyo Politecnic.
Dos exemples d'actuacions residencials de l'Institut Català del Sol. Fontajau (Girona) i Gassó-Vargas (Ripollet).

Two examples of housing operations of the Institut Català del Sol. Fontajau (Girona) and Gassó-Vargas (Ripollet).