

# Housing Research and Design in Sweden

## Review by Roland Stanbridge

*Research on housing and housing construction is an important part of the responsibilities of the Swedish Council for Building Research. In the book "Housing Research and Design in Sweden" 22 researchers were asked to present their views on current knowledge, problems and debate in a Swedish perspective.*

*In the hope that the experience of these Swedish researchers will also be of interest to their colleagues in other countries – as well as to practitioners and others interested in social and policy issues related to housing – we have asked a journalist, Roland Stanbridge, to give his own personal view of the contents of the book. As a Sweden-based journalist with an interest in research issues Roland Stanbridge writes for a number of newspapers and journals, including the Guardian (London) and the Washington Post.*

Sweden had the lowest housing standard in Europe at the turn of the century, aside from Finland. By the sixties it had one of the world's highest, thanks to a massive building effort backed by careful research and tough regulations. But now it faces challenges that are by no means confined to Sweden: how does one keep up design standards in 'Hard Times'. What should one preserve and develop from the earlier productive era of functionalist zeal?

These are some of the questions tackled in this collation of Swedish research findings in the housing field. The work of 22 housing researchers, "Housing Research and Design in Sweden", was first published by the Swedish Council for Building Research in Swedish in 1985. The intention in releasing the book internationally is not to export Swedish housing design, but to set going a debate with housing researchers abroad on the basic fundamentals of good design.

It pin-points standards endangered by more austere financial conditions, and in particular, those that improve

the quality of life for "weaker" members of society: the poor, the aged, the handicapped – and the children.

Well-referenced and richly illustrated with examples of good, and even bad, Swedish design, "Housing Research and Design in Sweden" gives precise as well as more theoretical research findings and recommendations for future planning.

However, the reader also draws his own conclusions from chapters giving a dynamic account of developments, from a time when most worker families lived in one room, through the mushrooming suburbs and mad demolition frenzy of the sixties and seventies, to the careful renovation of the eighties. One gains a strong sense of the interplay between aspirations, policy and economics; housing research, government regulations and progress in building and design. Not only is it about how people set out to change the environment. It is about how a changed environment was intended to change the Swedish people.



*A typical forties area with shallow blocks, small flats and four storey buildings without lifts in Gothenburg. Photo: Jan Tomasson, 1979.*

## Laboratory of social change

Sweden has been one of the world's most efficient laboratories of social change; and housing policy has been one of its most powerful tools. Housing would not only bring equality to the workers, it was intended to improve the workers as people – and as units of production.

Two of the architects of the Swedish model, Nobel prize winners Gunnar (economics) and Alva Myrdal (peace) wrote in 1934 that a policy of social improvement founded on a housing policy would "create a better type of human material". This would make national production more effective!

## Renouncing history

Because it was totally in line with social democratic thinking in Sweden, planners wholeheartedly embraced the new functionalism in architecture, which renounced all historical and class-bound influences. Eager to force rebuilding, the government in 1947 passed a bill that made it more difficult to renovate dilapidated buildings.

To rehouse Sweden, a carrot was held out to developers: low interest loans. This put the State in a position for force developers to keep to guidelines that guaranteed good housing design.

The guidelines and building regulations changed with time, mostly for the better, and a list of requirements grew: attic storage; communal laundries and drying rooms; playgrounds in the immediate vicinity; handicap accessibility; to name just a few.

Some of Sweden's best designs emerged during this progressive period after World War II. But there was still a housing shortage, and in the 1950s half of Gothenburg workers still had one-roomed flats.

## Mass production a vision

By the mid-sixties Sweden had become a super-industrial state that could massproduce the social democrats' architectural and socio-economic vision. The aim was to construct one million flats in ten years; and they came fairly close to that figure (the population in Sweden today is only 8.5 million in all). The flats tended to be spacious with many fine functionalist qualities. But unit planning for good neighbourliness was not one of them.

Dissociated from a historical view of development, Sweden went on a demolition spree. This would perhaps sweep away injustice and class, but it



*A house built during the 1880s by 10 working class families in Gothenburg.*

also threw away hunks of history and tradition, and even the natural surroundings were remoulded in vast concrete suburbs with package produced gardens. Many city centres also suffered the hand of the great leveller.

Anti-demolition action groups plus growing numbers of unlet flats eventually resulted in a change of course from development to renewal. The special Housing Renewal Act of 1973 and the 10-year renovation programme launched in 1983 aimed to redistribute capital to renovation.

## Exodus

Meanwhile, a large section of the population showed their view of the functionalist flatlands by beginning an exodus – still going on – to single family housing areas. There was also

a rapidly increasing percentage of tenant owner flats in city centres.

All this means that some of the good developments of the progressive era are under threat. Safeguarding and further developing them – as well as finding solutions for their weakness – are essential.

To quote from the book: "During hard times, when much of what was once self-evident is questioned because it is economically inconvenient, we feel that it is important to uphold respect for the basic requirements".

The book "Housing Research and Design in Sweden", 281 pp, approx. SEK 340, ISBN 91-540-5179-7, can be purchased through Almqvist & Wiksell International, P O Box 638, S-101 28 Stockholm, Sweden

## Construction of New Housing Doubled in Four Years

Housing starts in Sweden totalled 67,600 units in 1990, an increase of 15% from 1989 and more than a doubling compared with 30,770 units in 1986. The 1990 figure includes a 26% increase for flats in apartment buildings to 40,800 and a 2% increase for family houses to 26,800. Modernization in apartment houses, which involved nearly 30,000 flats in 1986, dropped to 15,600.

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