

# Empty presence | empty absence

## The critical role of housing in the shape of public space

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*ABSTRACT. Much research has focused on the transformation of public space and its traditional role as the locus of political life, and in the significant trends towards privatization as threats to social cohesion in society. However, as we shall argue, this change was precisely shaped by moral and governance concerns, that find its roots in the 19th century and its desire to build an image of public virtue. In fact, few studies regarded the process of housing reconfiguration, which started to take place at the time as an implementation of management programs for the reconstruction of social life, as a major critical point. The present paper attempts to address the consequences of new specializations, illustrated by Henri Roberts' Model Houses, that sought to absorb society, and all that was socially and morally reprehensible, from public to private places, claiming its correlation as the leading cause for the replacement of empty presences, formerly public spaces, by empty absences.*

*KEYWORDS. public, political, social, housing, reform, H.Roberts.*

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### **The public surveillance of the domestic**

Much research has focused on the transformation of public space and its traditional role as the locus of political life and in the significant trends towards privatization as threats to social cohesion in society. However, as we shall argue, this change was precisely shaped by ethical, moral and governance concerns, that find its roots back in the 19th century and its desire to build an image of public virtue. In fact, few studies regarded the process of housing reconfiguration, which started to take place at the time as an implementation of management programs for the reconstruction of social life, as a major critical point. The present paper seeks to investigate the consequences of new housing specializations — that sought to absorb society, and all that was socially and morally reprehensible, from public to private places — claiming its correlation as the leading cause for the replacement of "empty presences" — formerly public spaces, by "empty absences".

Richard Sennett has proposed the 19th century as the hinge that determined the imbalance between public and private spheres, when western societies gradually shifted the focus of their social and political concerns, to an inner and subjective world, characterized by an overvalued individualism, and embodying a political retreat which reflects in cities, democracy, and personal relationships. Accordingly, the family was idealized as a refuge from the society and its threats, described by Iris Young as being: "immorality, artificiality, disorder and danger [...], treasonous conspiracies, illicit sex, crime, deviance and disease" . This resulted, along with George Simmel, in an attitude of alienation, or "blasé", which became characteristic of the inhabitants of large cities, with consequences in everyday life: the inhibition of personal involvements and the overall effort to deny, minimize, contain and prevent the conflict with strangers. Consequently, today the concept of order means lack of contact, reshaping the former meaning of public space.

Reversing cause and effect, Michel Foucault describes modernity as a disciplinary process in which institutions represent their own coercive apparatus. Mentioning architecture specifically as a series of spatial devices, which served as a model for the emergent psychiatric institutions, schools, factories, prisons, asylums, and where else could be applied, Foucault conceives the idea of government in a broader sense, understood as "the conduct of conduct", programs, strategies and techniques of acting on human beings with specific purposes. Thus, the ideology of intimacy, that Sennett describes, would not be more than a mechanism of governance, that found in the institution home a bureaucratic instrument for rational planning, aiming to combine norms and forms to structure an efficient social order.

Henri Roberts' studies, such as *The dwellings of the labouring classes*, their arrangement and construction and those for the World Exhibition held in London, between 1850-51, will be examined as paradigmatic of a series of biopolitic reform campaigns through a set of moralizations that determined the concept of modern family (the nuclear family) as we know it today, extending the control of morality and vice, once confined to prisons, schools and churches to housing. Through architecture, the domestic space became a social hybrid field that legitimized the state for the inspection and evaluation of the activities and relationships of the individuals who constitute the population, allowing the social reform not only of the private sphere, but also the structure of a new public order in civil society. It is precisely the predominant role of the modern construction of the domus in the contemporary definition of the polis that this paper aims to discuss.

### **The Model Houses as a Treatise on Civility**

(Fig.1)

Roberts' Model Houses appeared in the English context of the dynamics and tensions brought about by the Industrial Revolution. On the one hand, the translation of all scientific discoveries, initiated in the previous two centuries, in major technological achievements truly useful, instilled the society of the time with a strength confidence in the potential progress of humanity. On the other hand, this wave of optimism was confronted with the decline of the traditional city, suddenly overdensified, due to a massive migration flux, as the transformation of the world occurred quicker than the city had the capacity to monitor and adapt. Indeed, the speed of urbanization resulted in an unexpected and chaotic imbalance that urged to order. Furthermore, the growing demand for housing resulted in a huge real estate speculation and, consequently, in the proliferation of "cavernous dwellings which mostly lacked individual water supplies or sanitary facilities". Under these conditions epidemics spread and, as the number of industrial workers in the poverty line increased, so the delinquency and crime. The growing awareness of the role of the State, and its responsibilities, in the management of economic progress, essential for the maintenance of political and military supremacy, resulted in deep political and social changes, and in the transformation of the city into a subject of specific policies to control public health and safety, as well as to establish a new moral order.

Statistical compilations developed by a series of committees created to investigate the origins of outbreaks of cholera and other maladies, to discover the causes of poverty, unemployment and growing problem of immorality of the lower classes, seen also as a kind of contagious disease, became the applicant. The results usually emphasized the "absolute necessity of actively and energetically setting about the work of their suppression" to avoid the danger of its spread to the general population. Soon, the deterioration of the poorer classes started to be described as a consequence of the unhealthy conditions of their overcrowded homes, a source of diseases, sexual promiscuity, drunkenness and criminal conspiracy. The conclusion that the worst physical and moral conditions were always coincident with the worst neighbourhoods and homes, the restructuring of the public domain was seen as dependent of major dwelling changes, understood as a primary source of all social problems.

The argument behind Roberts' essay, submitted to the Royal Institute of British Architects as a scientific and comprehensive study of the Model Houses he designed in the previous five years as the honorary architect of the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, the first company to develop model housings for the needy, follows these premises. Simultaneously a critical retrospective, the goal was to define, as he refers, some general principles as well as model layouts that should be taken into account when building dwellings both in towns and country, as they were widely pervaded by the same "evils", a scenario that Roberts describe from a visit to St.Giles — where sometime after was erected a Model Lodging House — as minimum and "lodging from forty to sixty human beings, men, women and children, besides dogs and cats", with ceilings easily touched by the hand, "without any ventilation, excepting through some half-patched broken squares of glass", concluding that "further details" would be unnecessary to describe; as "their very recital would disgust" the reader.

The social conditions, the new technologies available and the urgency for urban renewal offered the ideal setting to demonstrate the architecture's ability to contribute in a decisive way, such as science, to build a fairer society, and also to claim its responsibility, which was not only artistic but especially social and political, to transform humanity and the world in a better place through their own instrumentalization. As could be inferred by Roberts' statement about the importance of taking into special consideration workers' dwellings, he considered that the highest achievements of architecture were "accomplished through the

instrumentality of the working classes, whose skill and persevering industry conduce as much to the fame of the Architect as the steady valour of the soldier does to weave the crown of victory around the brow of his triumphant General." In this sense, architecture became a tool at the service of morality and power, criteria which defined its value and usefulness in a changing world. The interest of the Model Houses relies in the conception of its internal layout with the purpose of confining to the private sphere what use to take place outside it, according to the Victorian cult of intimacy, and its political character as the main vehicle of ideological conditioning, which prevails in most western countries, translated in the interior arrangements of dwellings and the (still) growing bourgeoisie fascination with privacy.

(Fig.2)

From the projects described are worth mentioning the first, a set of Model Dwellings, built between Gray's-inn-road and Lower Road in Pentonville, and the fifth, the Model Houses for Families in Streatham-Street, Bloomsbury, according to Roberts, the most important of the Society's buildings. The other three were mainly Lodging Houses for single men or single women with communal areas (such as kitchen, wash room, and common-room) and dormitories, superintended by a director under lodger's rules specified by the architect himself. If the Model of an Improved Lodging House for Working Men in Charles Street, was retrospectively considered by Roberts not to be a "model of what a lodging-house ought to be" , the Model Lodging House for Working men in George Street, Bloomsbury, notwithstanding the fact that more than half of the individual compartments were interior, with no light nor ventilation, at the time of its opening, it was described as providing all needs while leading to the health and physical comfort, as well as tended to increase mutual respect and elevate the poor to moral and intellectual beings, and the architect's role acclaimed as fundamental to social progress. In many ways they opened up the way for further discussions around the need to "provide a comfortable, cheap, healthy and modest" dwellings, "free from the temptations of vice and immorality" which beset the inmates of a crowded space "where, without regard to age or sex, the married and the unmarried too often herd together and contaminate each other" .

(Fig.3)

The dwellings in Pentonville consisted in a double row of two story houses, to accommodate twenty-three families and thirty single females, representing, therefore something in-between a Lodge House and a House for families, a difference paradigmatic of the discussions that were taken place at the time about the advantageous and disadvantageous of both. If a Lodge house had considerable benefits from the economic point of view, on the other hand it also allowed more easily the spread of epidemics, while the spatial separation of functioning could be a kind of preventive quarantine contagion in case of disease. In that sense, the project in Bloomsbury proved extremely daring for its time, implementing the separation of families, abolishing the communal areas such as toilets and kitchens that became incorporated within the private areas, and add workshops in the basement. But the specific emphasis on privacy was not meant to improve the freedom of intimacy, but on the contrary, it became a way of public conditioning, in which the institution family, previously understood as a wide organic entity, as described by Donzelot, played a crucial role. That is, the private became public, not in spatial terms, but in political terms. Thus, according to Habermas, the very notion of family acted as a government mechanism of exclusion that aimed to enclose people within family life, restricting possible conflicts between different groups.

(Fig.4)

In the following study, Roberts conceives a model-schema for family homes to be presented at the World Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London, under the title Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, proposing the definitive reconfiguration and reform of housing. The plans were intended to be able to reproduce indefinitely in many floors as necessary. The novelty of this proposal lied in the separation of families on the one hand, and between family members, on the other. The typical connecting doors between various compartments were also eliminated, each having its own to assure the privacy of the users. According to the general rules for family dwellings defined in his essay, none had less than three sleeping apartments, each with a distinct access, — for the couple, for the boys and for the girls — as no other arrangement could secure a due separation of sexes and, therefore, the morality within the family. Another innovation was the staircase with an exterior access connecting common landings and leading to each apartment's main door, allowing greater privacy and autonomy among families. Thus, the Model Houses equalled the treatises on civility that have been produced since Erasmus in a graphic way. They are an architectonic mark of a major transformation to the consubstantial notion of modesty, and specifically to the role of housing as an artefact of governance that, according to Nikolas Rose, have come to fill the space between the 'private' lives of the citizens and the 'public' concerns of the rulers, involving the "calculated management of human forces and powers in pursuit of the objectives of the institution". This paradigm of social criticism is characterized by "moral entrepreneurship of professional groups; the medicalization of social problems; the extension of social control; the ideological nature of knowledge claims; the social interest of scientists; the psychological sciences as legitimating areas". Thus the idea of government "refers neither to the actions of a calculating political subject, nor to the operations of bureaucratic mechanisms and personnel". Instead, describes a way of "striving to reach social and political ends, acting in a calculated manner upon the forces, activities and relation of the individuals that constitute the population". In that sense, the Model Houses can be understood as a spatial program for the management and reconstruction of social life, organizing human beings to achieve certain results according to the criteria provided for us by others through "self-inspection, self-problematization, self-monitoring and confession".

(Fig.5)

In fact, the new definition of family was not simply the result of ideological impregnation, but largely the result of transformations carried out in domestic architecture through housing-model programs according to the values and norms of capitalist society, a product of liberal reform. Until the 19th century, the house of the working class was the hall, which etymologically simply meant "a place covered by a roof", with no divisions, where everything happened: "cooking, undressing, sleeping, working, washing, bathing, defecating, urinating, fornicating, dying and given birth" . The term hall evolved only to the sense of "entry, vestibule" in the 17th century, "at a time when the doors opened onto the main room of a house". Even the word room was only registered as a separated division in the mid-15th century, and this applied only for the upper classes. Furthermore, the specific distinctions of rooms, such as bathroom or living-room, were first mentioned in 1780 and 1795, respectively, although the word bedroom as evolved from bedchamber since the 14th century . By the nomenclature in use, such improvements started to take place by the end of the 18th century. However, the idea of turning housing more private, as opposed to places whose doors were always open, to reinforce the once almost indistinct boundaries between the domestic making and the public spheres, through intentional new spatializations, occurred just in the 19th century. The attempt to separate rooms and circulations, assigning to them different functions, intended to absorb society from public places

to private places: the bedroom would confine sleeping, as well as sex and prostitution; the living-room would avoid the public grouping of marginal crowds, the kitchen looked up for controlling waste and smells, the wash room attempted to turn the body and its biological needs intimate.

Eventually, the model, which received the patronage of the Prince, was built for four families, two on each floor, and was later transferred to Kennington Common becoming known as The Prince Consort's Model Cottages. Although hailed as a true example of how it should be designed the family home, the truth is that they were rarely equalled in that century, although having left a corpus that has imprinted a considerable influence and ascendancy over several generations of architects.

(Fig.6)

### **The Model infiltration**

The Model Houses marked the research for rest of the 20th century and its design is still imprinted in our homes today. The interior housing space became increasingly private and specific, following the bourgeoisie model behind moral issues around the preservation of children, the evils of servants, and the moral dangers of lodgers and communal sleeping arrangements, as illustrated by Robert Kerr's *The Gentleman's House*, where he argues that the infinite number of rooms described, although not applicable to small houses, should extend as a set of general principles. Even if the modernist agenda sought the maximum efficiency of the dwelling reducing its space to the minimum necessary, these principles are very clearly revealed, for instance, in Alexander Klein scheme for a "frictionless living".

(Fig.7)

Mies, which could be pointed as having been subversive to this model, followed and further improved it in the Weissenhof apartments. He provides apartments of one, two, and three bedrooms, and in that sense extends the concept breaking up with the idea of lodging houses for singles, and anticipating much of the actual discussions about different family types. This argument could be confronted with the degree of spatial uncertainty of Mies' patio houses, namely the absence of a specific space that could be called bedroom, and the specific placement of only a single bed in the composition. As Iñaki Ábalos, so eloquently described, he evokes Simmel's cosmopolitan, and we can imagine Mies, almost autobiographically, in his resignation to the family, to walk through these same spaces in a kind of self-projection. However, from our point of view the patio houses' projects, were not a research on a housing typology, rather, they reveal an interest on structures and archetypal space organizations, repeatable and usable in a wide variety of situations or programmatic activities.

(Fig.8)

Although the model houses were mainly a floor plan arrangement, and the interior organization of a typical family dwelling did not improve that much ever since, they did not have a critical impact on the overall design of buildings nor in public space until the 20th century. What they did was to build up a kind of ethical scenario about what the public and private spheres ought to be, assigning a new role within society to the public space. But almost in line with Michel de Certeau's argument about the subversive "ways of using products imposed by a dominant economic order", it was only with the advent of modernism that the design of public spaces was definitely challenged, recognizing the absolute necessity of a different production of the urban space along with the domestic by taking further several arguments underlying the Model Houses. In fact, if we look at Corbuiser *Immeuble Villas*' floor plans (Paris, 1922-29), the rooms' scheme is very similar. However, the increasing importance of the balcony, the roofscape and the terrace meant to

incorporate the public space, the outer space, within the private, confining it to its specific social group. The urban greenery was not meant to be used, but to look over within one's home, the roads were for speed commuting, the streets replaced by pathways and housing galleries, or even internal streets as in the Unité d'Habitation.

(Fig.9)

More recently, in Borneo-Sporenburg's Master Plan, West 8 defined a series of rules for the patio dwelling houses, where among others 50% of the surface should be devoted to introverted gardens or patios and the cars should be preferably given a parking space inside the plots in private garages. For Adrian Geuze, "in the hectic contemporary life with hundreds of decisions and fragmented landscapes", the home should be "safe and defined", a "base" that "prioritizes enclosure before the view", introverted and incorporating "nature within instead of exposure to it".

(Fig.10)

Intertwining definitions of public and private, political and social, collective and individual

The definition of public space has been often, if not always, ambiguous. Hannah Arendt points out, in *The Human Condition*, how the aristotelian concept of *zōo politikon* was mistranslated into latin to *animal socialis*, and further developed into *homo est naturaliter politicus, id est, socialis*, an unconscious replacement of the Greek meaning of political by the social, whose roman roots do not find an equivalent in Greek. In fact, the human capacity of political organization was not only different but opposite to this natural association founded by the house and the family, whose destruction preceded "the foundation of the polis" For the Greeks, being politic and living in the polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion, the antithesis of the pre-politic and violent family organization subjected to the despotism of the head of the household. The public sphere was the realm of individuality, the only place where one could express what he really was. On the contrary, modern privacy, as described by Sennet, is a threat to the political sphere in its understanding of it as the realm for being social, that is, acting according to the conventions that once regulated impersonal relations in public, and consequently, promoting cosmopolitanism and civility. Paradoxically, the Model Houses attempted to empty the public space in order to make it virtually ordered, safe and moral. They tried to mask existing class struggles and deny the heterogeneous essence of cities, aiming to normalize its members and to avoid spontaneous or unexpected actions. Still according to Arendt, the emergence of the social sphere, which was neither private nor public, is a relatively new phenomenon, whose origin coincided with the modern era. In the contemporary world, the social and political domains are not as different as they used to be, because the domestic and all the issues previously inherent to the private sphere were transformed into collective interests and concerns, assuming a public importance. Even the word privacy, that formerly meant literally that one was deprived of something and therefore could be only a slave or a barbarian, is totally the opposite of its contemporary meaning. Additionally, "modern privacy is at least as sharply opposed to the social realm — unknown to the ancients who considered its content a private matter — as it is to the political, properly speaking. The decisive historical fact is that modern privacy in its most relevant function, to shelter the intimate, was discovered as the opposite not to the political sphere but to the social, to which it is therefore more closely and authentically related".

It is interesting to note that the endless discussions around public space over the last decades were not able to define what characterizes a good design for it. However, it is generally accepted that a good public space is one that promotes

social encounter, social bounding, social and cultural interchange. By recognizing the impact of different housing concepts on the intertwining definitions of public and private, political and social, collective and individual boundaries, we might recognize that in order to discuss public space design, a broader reassessment of its meaning and role is still needed, and its discussion cannot be separated from that of housing.

(Fig.11)

### **Biography**

Mónica Pacheco (b. Lisbon, 1977) graduated in Architecture from Faculdade de Arquitetura Universidade Técnica de Lisboa (2000). She has completed a Master in Housing and Urbanism at the Architectural Association in London (2004) and is currently finishing her PhD thesis in Architecture at FAL/UTL. She has been assistant professor at ISCTE-IUL since 2004 teaching design studios, and is also a member and researcher of CIAAM and DINÂMIA-CET. She worked in architectural offices in Portugal and the Netherlands, as UnStudio and OMA. Her research interests focus on the correlation of domesticity, housing and urbanism, and specifically in the link between drawing, techniques of spatial conceptualization, the process of architectural design, and questions of representation and governmentality.

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### **Legends**

Fig.1 Gustave Doré, the living conditions of a working class neighborhood in the 19th century.

Fig.2 Henri Roberts, Model Dwellings in Pentonville.

Fig.3 Henri Roberts, Lodgings Houses in George Street and Hatton Garden.

Fig.4 Henri Roberts, Model Houses for Families, Bloomsbury.

Fig.5 Henri Roberts, The Prince Consort's Model Cottages.

Fig.6 Henri Roberts, Model Houses for Workmen in Towns.

Fig.7 Alexander Klein, scheme for a "frictionless living".

Fig.8 Mies van der Rohe, Weissenhof apartments, Stuttgart.

Fig.9 Le Corbusier, Immeuble Villas' floor plan.

Fig.10 West 8, conceptual diagram for the patio dwelling houses in Borneo-Sporenburg.