

TOWER

Social
Housing
Legacies
and
Futures

**T H E A R C H I
T E C T U R A L
L E A G U E N Y**

**SLAB
BLOCK
SUPER**

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The Cooper Union
41 Cooper Square
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Tower, Slab, Superblock: Social Housing Legacies and Futures

Brick towers, concrete slabs, low-rise superblocks. These forms are a familiar sight in many corners of the world as new housing, often state-sponsored and modernist in design, sprung up to address housing shortages and population booms following World War II.

The Architectural League has brought together architects, historians, and activists from three cities dealing with increasing unaffordability and diminishing state support—London, Paris, and Toronto—to discuss policy and design strategies for reinvigorating postwar social housing to better serve current residents and future generations. These buildings are a great physical asset, and today's event will encourage discussion and debate about the future prospects of mass housing and varied approaches to its renovation and redevelopment.

This conference is one of a number of housing programs currently underway at the League, including Typecast, a series in our online magazine *Urban Omnibus* reexamining ostensibly outmoded housing typologies. These projects continue the work of recent League design studies, exhibitions, and events addressing pressing housing issues. From the 1987 project *Vacant Lots*, which sought proposals for small-scale infill housing, to 2011's *Making Room*, which suggested approaches to micro-housing, accessory units, and shared housing in collaboration with the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, the League is committed to design advocacy in the public interest.

Introduction

Reexamining Postwar Mass Housing

In 2004, architects Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal, and Frédéric Druot authored a manifesto on the value of renovation over demolition with a powerful opening statement: "Never demolish, never remove or replace, always add, transform, and reuse!" Their study, *PLUS*, came in response to an architectural competition to replace a 1960s high-rise apartment building on the outskirts of Paris, and has become emblematic of a surging interest in refurbishing postwar high-rise and superbloc housing.

Cities worldwide undertook major residential building programs in the mid-twentieth century to create much-needed new housing for workers and low-income residents. Usually built with direct state intervention and in clustered developments on superbloc sites, mass housing took different forms—from carefully detailed British council estates to aggressively pragmatist high-rises in the United States—but held the common promise of modern, reasonably priced apartments. Today, this built fabric represents a significant physical asset, yet in many cases suffers from maintenance issues, financial disinvestment, and social stigma.

Where once demolition seemed the de facto response to these persistent issues, efforts in a number of cities demonstrate that we can serve current residents, steward resources for the future, and reinvigorate the urban fabric through smart public policy and good design. Redevelopment has gone by different names—regeneration, transformation, revitalization—but in many of the best cases looks to maintain and improve the existing building stock and surroundings. When we choose to reinvest—in many cases the more financially, socially, and environmentally conscious decision—how do we do so in ways that benefit and protect current residents?

The Event

To this end, today's event will examine the history, current status, and prospects of high-rise and superblock residential development. The conference will confront three key questions of design and policy:

- 1** What does it mean to reconsider this building stock as an asset, rather than a liability or failure?
- 2** How can the building stock be reimagined to better serve current residents and future generations?
- 3** What roles can architects, designers, and affiliated professionals play in housing crises?

The day will focus on three cities—London, Paris, and Toronto—each of which is dealing with the twin pressures of increasingly unaffordable housing and diminishing state support.

Architects, historians, and activists will address housing renovation and redevelopment from the perspectives of process (finance, policy, governance, and community engagement) and design (building fabric, public spaces, neighborhood connections, and unit type).

On London

The Context

Britain made a massive commitment to housing in the postwar era. Nowhere was this more visible than London, where both thoughtful, carefully detailed modernist estates and poorly constructed prefabricated concrete towers began to dot the landscape. From 1946 to 1961, nine-tenths of all London's housing was built by local borough councils. By the 1970s, the effort was a success: effectively the entire population was housed.

Yet the state's commitment to social housing as homebuilder and landlord eroded. The zeal for privatization under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in the 1980s led to a massive contraction in the provision of social housing, most prominently with the passage of Right to Buy, which subsidizes social housing tenants to purchase their homes.

Today, as London's population approaches 9 million, the need for more—and more affordable—housing is evident. Half of the city's population rents. Of these about 24% are social renters, as of 2011, down from a high of 35% in 1981. For Londoners who rent on the private market, rents now devour on average nearly two-thirds of their gross income.

London's housing estates—run either by borough authorities or private, not-for-profit housing associations—are home to a mix of social renters, private renters, and homeowners. Palpable fears about the stability of social housing are coming on the heels of Parliament's passage in May of the 2016 Housing and Planning Act, which critics charge will further diminish the dwindling supply of affordable housing, and the controversial demolition of some of London's most famous council estates, including the Heygate. Regeneration—a nonspecific word often used for the redevelopment of existing social housing estates—is underway or expected at about 100 estates across London.

Sources: Works by James Meek; Anna Minton and Paul Watt; and Tom Wilkinson (see Further Reading) as well as *Housing in London 2015* from the Mayor of London

Regeneration efforts are being implemented in markedly different ways with regard to demolition, tenancy, resident engagement, and other factors. Social housing's precarious moment in London has inspired a wellspring of housing activism and proposals for alternatives to demolition, some of which will be explored by the speakers today.

On Paris

The Context

Paris is a rare example of a major city that has maintained a commitment to social housing. In France, social housing is primarily provided through hundreds of *Habitation à loyer modéré* (HLM) organizations, which include both public and private, non-profit companies working under the control of the Ministry of Housing and Finance. Paris Habitat, founded in 1914 and one of a number of HLM organizations in the Île-de-France, is one of the largest public housing authorities in Europe. It is responsible for about 124,000 apartments housing more than 300,000 residents in metropolitan Paris. About 20% of apartments in Paris are social housing units (with a directive from Mayor Anne Hidalgo to reach 30% by 2030), allowing some working-class people to remain in the increasingly expensive city. Paris Habitat continues to build new social housing, often bringing quality design, and sometimes experimental architecture, to bear in the process. The Tour Bois-le-Prêtre, a 1961 concrete building where Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal, and Frédéric Druot first applied their process of tower block renovation and transformation in 2011, is a Paris Habitat building in the 17th *arrondissement*.

Affordable housing has a very different image just outside the Périphérique, the ring road that serves as the city's administrative border. Inside, publicly-financed housing is mostly small and architecturally diverse buildings. Outside, large-scale concrete modernist structures prevail. The suburban *banlieues* are defined by housing slabs and tower blocks built during the *trente glorieuses* ("glorious thirty years") of the postwar era. The French state constructed concrete apartment blocks in suburbs and new towns with the impulse to use modernist architecture and mass housing as instruments of modernization and social progress. Though approximately 80% of metropolitan Paris's population lives outside the city limits, the collective projects of the *banlieue* have come to connote slums, stigmatizing the now largely immigrant population.

Sources: Works by Javier Arpa and Kenny Cupers (see Further Reading) as well as Paris Habitat

The various forms of state-funded housing in Paris, and the role of state-led urbanism and architectural experimentation, will be discussed by today's presenters.

On Toronto

The Context

Government-provided social housing is relatively scarce in Toronto. Of the city's 2.8 million residents, 110,000, or less than 4%, live in units run by the city's housing authority. Dozens of public housing developments are currently being "revitalized" as mixed-income neighborhoods in a manner familiar to the U.S. and western Europe. Regent Park, built in the late 1940s as Canada's first public housing project, is currently one of Toronto's largest redevelopment sites. Condemnation of the 1960s modernist mid-rises of another well-known development, Don Mount Court (now rechristened Rivertowne), led to its demolition.

In a city where 45% of the population rents, another segment of the housing stock has become de facto affordable housing: tower apartments built as the city boomed after World War II. Unusually for North America, modernist tower-in-the-park housing proliferated at the city's fringes and suburban outskirts—areas which are now in the city proper as the municipal boundaries have expanded, most recently in 1998. Toronto has the second largest stock of high-rises 12 stories or taller in North America, after New York City. The nearly 2,000 apartment towers, built primarily in the 1960s and 70s, account for nearly a third of all housing in Toronto and almost half of the rental stock, including some of its most affordable units.

The towers were primarily a product of the private market, built to house professionals and families in the growing city. Today approximately 85% of this tower stock is privately owned. The isolation of these aging towers has in many cases led to their marginalization. Toronto's population is 46% foreign-born, and many of the city's newest residents find homes in tower neighborhoods. Toronto's Tower Renewal program is a multi-faceted initiative from the public, private, and non-profit sectors with the stated goal of creating environmental, social, and economic change in tower neighborhoods through placemaking, building retrofits, zoning changes, and other efforts.

Sources: Works by Martine August and Graeme Stewart (see Further Reading) as well as the City of Toronto and Toronto Community Housing

Today's speakers will present on two faces of affordability in Toronto today: the redevelopment of public housing and the resource of its private towers.

Films

Concrete Stories

Dir: Lorenz Findeisen
2014
72 minutes

Europe's postwar housing shortage found a supposed cure-all in the form of the precast concrete apartment block. With a surprising sense of humor, *Concrete Stories* relates the modernist promise of uniform slab buildings as symbols of progress and collectivism through archival footage interwoven with contemporary interviews. Beginning with French engineer Raymond Camus's 1948 patent for a system of prefabricated concrete construction, the film traces the economic and political reasons that reinforced concrete towers proliferated from Western Europe to the Eastern bloc.

Cressingham Gardens

Dir: Sanda Kolar
2014
21 minutes

Designed by Ted Hollamby and built between 1968 and 1978, Cressingham Gardens is a council estate in central London. In 2012, the Lambeth Council proposed demolishing the terraced houses and replacing them with apartment blocks, which ignited a resident-led campaign seeking refurbishment over demolition. (The film was made to assist the Save Cressingham Gardens group.) The documentary examines the architectural heritage of this pioneering garden estate through the eyes of residents. Cressingham Gardens's fate remains uncertain.

Farewell Oak Street

Dir: Grant McLean
1953
16 minutes

Farewell Oak Street, produced by the National Film Board of Canada and narrated by actor Lorne Greene, mixes documentary and fictionalized dramatic scenes to depict a working-class family rehoused from Toronto's Cabbagetown slum to Regent Park, Canada's first public housing development. Very much a product of its time, the film contrasts the depravity of Cabbagetown with the promise of Regent Park as an agent of social reform. Regent Park is now being redeveloped as a mixed-income neighborhood.

HIGHRISE: One Millionth Tower

Dir: Katerina Cizek
2011
7 minutes

One Millionth Tower is the third chapter in the four-part HIGHRISE series from the National Film Board of Canada, exploring "vertical living in the global suburbs." Four Toronto apartment tower residents—Faith, Jamal, Ob, and Priti—collaborated with architects and animators to envision a more active, lively, and connected neighborhood through new gardens, walking paths, and community spaces.

Housing Problems

Dir: Arthur Elton and
Edgar Anstey
1935
15 minutes

Likely the first film to explicitly address the issue of housing conditions, this documentary was also the first to feature ordinary people talking directly to the camera. *Housing Problems* shares the stories of former East London tenement residents who are rehoused in the new Quarry Hill Estate. The film is an optimistic tale about state-sponsored housing, and a biased one: It was produced by the British Commercial Gas Association, which advocated for Quarry Hill's construction—and its new gas connections. The estate was demolished in 1978.

Imaginaries of Transformation

Dir: Karine Dana
2015
21 minutes

Imaginaries of Transformation details the work of French architects Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal, and Frédéric Druot, using their 2004 manifesto on housing rehabilitation, *PLUS*, as a launching point. The film focuses on the Grand Parc apartment transformation in Bordeaux, where the trio applied the strategies outlined in *PLUS*. They traded the concrete panel façade for a new energy-efficient glass one and added “winter garden” balconies to extend the living space, all while residents remained in their homes. This site-specific response makes a strong financial, environmental, and social case for renovation.

Uprooted

Dir: Ross Domoney
2016
27 minutes

The 1970s-era Myatts Field North housing estate in Brixton has, since 2012, been undergoing regeneration that has demolished the former terraced blocks and rebranded the neighborhood as “Oval Quarter.” *Uprooted* follows Miss Daly, Amaka, and Joseph's final days on the council estate as they watch their former neighbors' homes meet the wrecking ball and prepare to move to newly-built apartments. The film shares the human toll of regeneration—what Amaka calls the “psychological, emotional, and spiritual” trauma of being forcibly rehoused.

Utopia London

Dir: Tom Cordell
2010
82 minutes

Examining the history of a dozen of London's modernist developments designed by architects from Berthold Lubetkin to Kate Macintosh, *Utopia London* chronicles the idealistic visions of planners and architects seeking to build “a better Britain” in the wake of World War II's destruction. The film expresses the optimism of postwar-era modernism and captures interviews with architects on-site at buildings they designed. Much attention is given to the promise of social housing estates, expressed in the clean lines and careful detailing of developments such as Alton East and Park Hill.

Speakers

Javier Arpa

Research and Education
Coordinator of The Why
Factory at Delft University of
Technology

Javier Arpa is an author, curator, researcher, and lecturer on architecture and urbanism. He was curator of the 2015 exhibitions *Paris Habitat* and *Paysages Habités* at the Pavillon de l'Arsenal in Paris, and the author of the accompanying monograph, *Paris Habitat: One Hundred Years of City, One Hundred Years of Life*. The exhibition and monograph underline the contribution of public housing to citymaking and the capacity of historical architectural precedents to respond to contemporary concerns. He is the Research and Education Coordinator of The Why Factory, a global think tank and research institute run by MVRDV and Delft University of Technology. He currently teaches at the Delft University of Technology and Columbia University. Javier was previously Senior Editor for a+t research group, one of Europe's leading publishers in architecture and urban design, and the co-author of many a+t volumes.

Martine August

Postdoctoral Fellow in the
Bloustein School of Planning
and Public Policy at Rutgers
University

Martine August is a critical urban scholar whose work explores the production of socio-spatial inequality and the pursuit of urban social justice. She is a postdoctoral fellow in the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, conducting research on community organizing against displacement and gentrification in three global cities. Her doctoral research, carried out at the University of Toronto, critically examined mixed-income public housing redevelopment at two Canadian revitalization sites. She has also worked as a housing policy advisor for the Ontario provincial government, focusing on homelessness and affordable housing policy. She has been recognized with the Royal Society of Canada's Alice Wilson Award for her postdoctoral work, the Urban Affairs Association's Emerging Scholar Award, and a Trudeau Foundation Scholarship.

Jean-Louis Cohen

Sheldon H. Solow Professor
in the History of Architecture
at New York University

Jean-Louis Cohen has held the Sheldon H. Solow Chair in the History of Architecture at New York University since 1993. His research focuses on 20th-century architecture and urban planning, including Parisian urban form, planning in colonial Algeria and Morocco, and German and Soviet architectural culture. In 2014, he was curator of the French pavilion at the 14th Venice Biennale of Architecture. From 1997 to 2003, he led work to create Paris's Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine, a research and exhibition center that opened to the public in 2007. Early in his career, he directed the Architectural Research Program at the French Ministry of Housing. He is the author most recently of *France* (2015), *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes* (2013), *The Future of Architecture—Since 1889* (2012), *Architecture in Uniform: Designing and Building for WWII* (2011), and *New York* (2008).

Kenny Cupers

Associate Professor in
the History and Theory of
Architecture and Urbanism
at the University of Basel

Kenny Cupers is Associate Professor in the History and Theory of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Basel. His research centers on questions of human and material agency, the epistemology and geopolitics of modernism, and design as a technique of social intervention. He is the author of *The Social Project: Housing Postwar France* (2014), winner of the International Planning History Society European book prize and the SAH Spiro Kostof Award, amongst other prizes. Other publications include *Use Matters: An Alternative History of Architecture* (2013) and *Spaces of Uncertainty* (2002, with Markus Miessen).

Geraldine Dening

Co-Founder, Architects for
Social Housing

Geraldine Dening is an architect with her own practice based in London and a senior lecturer at the Leicester School of Architecture, where she teaches in the BA and MArch architecture programs. She received her BA from Cambridge University and her Dip Arch from the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. Geraldine is the co-founder and Director of Architects for Social Housing, for which she is the lead architect.

Frédéric Druot

Founding Partner, Frédéric Druot Architecture

Frédéric Druot founded Paris-based Frédéric Druot Architecture in 1992. In 2007, he co-authored, with Anne Lacaton and Jean-Phillipe Vassal, *PLUS: Grands ensembles territoires d'exception*, which argued against the demolition of aging housing towers in favor of their renovation. He then partnered with Lacaton & Vassal on the transformation of the Tour Bois-le-Prêtre in Paris (winner of the Prix de l'Équerre d'Argent, 2011) and the Cité du Grand Parc in Bordeaux (2016), which expand social housing units and create a new façade through the addition of "winter gardens" onto the existing buildings. In addition to public and museum projects in Europe, Frédéric is currently working on a study similar to *PLUS* in São Paulo, Brazil.

Simon Elmer

Co-Founder, Architects for Social Housing

Simon Elmer is a writer and housing campaigner with a PhD from University College London. In a previous life, he was a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, and has taught at the universities of London, Manchester, Reading, and Roehampton. He is the co-founder and Director of Architects for Social Housing, for which he is the commissar for propaganda.

Rosalie Genevro

Executive Director, The Architectural League of New York

As executive director of The Architectural League, Rosalie Genevro has guided and intensified the League's design advocacy in the public interest. Early in her career she served as research director of a non-profit corporation that worked to improve the physical, financial, and operational condition of New York City's inventory of federally-subsidized housing. At the League, she has directed the housing design studies *Vacant Lots*, on infill housing for small sites; *Arverne: Housing on the Edge*, suggesting approaches to large-scale development on an environmentally sensitive site; and *Making Room*, a collaboration with the Citizens Housing and Planning Council to develop ideas for micro-housing, accessory units, and shared housing as means to adapt New York City's housing for its changing demographic make-up. She also directed the League exhibitions *Urban Life: Housing in the Contemporary City* and *Housing New York*.

Phineas Harper

Deputy Director, The
Architecture Foundation

Phineas Harper is a critic, designer and filmmaker who lives on a canal boat in London. He is Deputy Director of the Architecture Foundation and former Deputy Editor of the *Architectural Review*. He writes widely on the intersection of architecture and politics for titles including *Domus*, *Dezeen*, the *RIBA J*, *Uncube*, and *The Architects' Journal*. He is author of the *Architecture Sketchbook* (2015) and *People's History of Woodcraft Folk* (2016), with a foreword by Jeremy Corbyn. In 2015, he co-created Turncoats, a design-based debating society which now has chapters on four continents.

Paul Karakusevic

Founding Partner,
Karakusevic Carson
Architects

Paul Karakusevic founded Karakusevic Carson Architects to undertake public projects, particularly civic building and social housing. KCA is now one of the practices leading the debate on social housing in London and working on the largest and most complex housing projects for ambitious, design-focused local authorities and public sector clients. The 80-person studio sees resident engagement as a key generator in developing an urban design and architectural process that is specific to each project. Paul is currently authoring a RIBA book that details exemplary social housing design and delivery. He is also a Mayoral and Design Council Advisor, helping to masterplan London-wide infrastructure and investment programs.

Susanne Schindler

Architect, writer, and
housing columnist for
Urban Omnibus

Susanne Schindler is an architect and writer focused on the intersection of policy and design in housing. From 2013 to 2016, she was lead researcher and co-curator of *House Housing: An Untimely History of Architecture and Real Estate* at Columbia University's Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, and co-author of *The Art of Inequality: Architecture, Housing, and Real Estate—A Provisional Report*. Susanne has taught design at Parsons and Columbia, and is currently pursuing a PhD at ETH Zurich. She writes on housing for *Urban Omnibus*, the online publication of The Architectural League.

Graeme Stewart

Principal, ERA Architects

Graeme Stewart is a Principal at ERA Architects in Toronto. He has been involved in numerous urban design, cultural planning, conservation, and architecture projects with particular focus on neighborhood design and regional sustainability. Graeme was a key initiator of the Tower Renewal Project. This initiative in modern heritage and community reinvestment examines the future of Toronto's remarkable stock of modern tower neighborhoods in collaboration with the United Way, City of Toronto, Province of Ontario, University of Toronto, and other partners. He is the co-editor of *Concrete Toronto: A Guidebook to Concrete Architecture from the Fifties to the Seventies*. In 2010, he received an RAIC National Urban Design Award for his ongoing Tower Renewal work, and in 2014 received the Jane Jacobs Prize, presented by *Spacing* magazine.

Lawrence Vale

Ford Professor of Urban Design and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Lawrence Vale is Ford Professor of Urban Design and Planning at MIT. He has taught in the MIT School of Architecture and Planning since 1988, and he is currently the director of the Resilient Cities Housing Initiative. Much of his recent published work has examined the history, politics, and design of American public housing, including *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors* (2001), *Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods* (2005), *Purging the Poorest: Public Housing and the Design Politics of Twice-Cleared Communities* (2013), and *Public Housing Myths: Perceptions, Reality and Social Policy* (2015, co-edited with Nicholas Bloom and Fritz Umbach).

About The Architectural League of New York

The Architectural League of New York nurtures excellence in architecture, design, and urbanism and stimulates thinking and debate about the critical design and building issues of our time. As a vital, independent forum for architecture and its allied disciplines, the League helps create a more beautiful, vibrant, innovative, and sustainable future.

For more information on the League, visit:
<http://archleague.org>

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Further Reading

The rehabilitation of social housing and the reassessment of the postwar high-rise are topics that have received a lot of scholarly and popular attention. For a reading list of some of the most interesting work that influenced our thinking as we planned this event, visit:

<http://archleague.org/superblock-reading>

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