BOOK REVIEW: COMPLEX HOUSING. DESIGNING FOR DENSITY,
JULIA WILLIAMS ROBINSON
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.26687/archnet-ijar.v11i3.1412

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Keywords

The Netherlands; complex housing; typology; environmental psychology

Abstract

This is a clear, useful and practical book, which makes an important link between research in environment-behaviour studies and practice, in this case architecture, urbanism and planning. The goal of the book is straightforward: to analyse ‘complex housing’, here defined as middle-high density, with a mix of tenures, uses and renting/ownership ranges, and of urban significance, in a structured and consistent manner, and with a degree of professional criticism stemming both from the author’s view and that of a range of professionals involved in the projects illustrated. The context selected is the Netherlands, a country that for geographic, political, cultural and religious reasons has had a rather special and successful record in dealing with density in housing both from an architectural and urban point of view, at least until recently, as the author reminds us (‘spatial plans’ have been abandoned in 2005).

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INTRODUCTION

This is a clear, useful and practical book, which makes an important link between research in environment-behaviour studies and practice, in this case architecture, urbanism and planning.

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The book is structured in 4 main parts that, even if of significantly different lengths, are all of equal importance to the aim of the book:

PART 1: PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION

A historic overview of housing in the Netherland, to explain how its relatively tight, structured, urban, socially balanced character stems from very practical necessities: the Netherlands are a highly man-made environment which has always required a decisive and efficient top-down management of infrastructure. Religion has also affected the attitude towards housing as a society’s fundamental responsibility (up the 1980s home ownership was relatively low, with social and private rental reaching the 60% overall).

This section essentially justifies using the Netherlands as a good source of case studies in housing: their experience in delivering compact, efficient and lasting stock is the result of a good balance of strategic thinking implemented through planning systems which capture increases in land value to provide infrastructure first and foremost. Architectural and urban quality are an expectation, and part of a true strategic mentality.

In this section, comparisons between Dutch and American housing contexts are several, starting from the fundamental interpretations of housing as a need/right, to the delivery mechanisms and the products delivered. These comparisons are useful, and although not the focus of the book, set the scene to both understands better the Dutch examples, and to allow reflecting how the best practices shown might be thought-of in other contexts.
PART 2: ANALYSING COMPLEX HOUSING

This section defines the methodology used to select, study and comment upon the 8 case studies illustrated in the rest of the book.

Here the logic, justification and decisions benefit from the author’s strong background in a field complementary to architecture and urban design, namely environmental psychology. In looking for a comprehensive list of those factors that a complex housing project should deliver, she refers to research on the impact that built and natural environments have on people, and uses them to build a structured and comparable narrative across the projects.

Issues of density, access and distribution, privacy, ownership and control, access to nature, are listed as playing an important role on housing quality and satisfaction, and analysed through an overview of typologies.

Typologies are studied in detail across a number of factors, such as their relationship with the context (in terms of location, uses, landmark value, access and parking), form (in terms of massing, contextual compatibility, density), relationship to open green and public space, dwelling type (in relation to dwelling layout, access to the dwelling and circulation between dwellings, access to open private and public space), and mix of tenures and uses. The author adopts a way to search, measure and describe each of the issues across all case studies, so that they are all assessed against the same important principles. In some instances, these are straightforward (i.e. comparing for example densities and tenures), in others less so (i.e. the organisational principle that explains the sequence of thresholds between public and private space. She uses the gamma syntax to diagram how each project takes people from the street to the dwelling).

PART 3: CASE STUDIES

This section includes the 8 case studies. Each case is described via an introduction to the design brief, context and set of events that delivered it, and then analysed typologically, using the set of issues selected in part 2. Since each project plays an important role in its context, and is either a visual or social landmark, this introduction is useful in clarifying the expectations that each project had to fulfil, thus explaining the real and long term value that successful design can have on an area and its people, and putting the hurdles encountered in perspective.

The narrative of the cases is straightforward, clear and easy to follow, also thanks to a commendable richness in photographs, architectural drawings and diagrams. These are especially helpful in explaining the mix and combination of units types, and the circulation systems adopted. In terms of explanatory diagrams, the urban scale is less explicit than the architectural one, so whilst all floor plans are provided, and also each unit type with an indication of their access to private, semi-private and public spaces, internal or external, come through mainly from the photographs.

At the end of each case, the author offers a list of lessons learned – successful and not, from the point of view of those who commissioned, delivered or use the projects. These sections are useful, in reminding us that delivering good housing is a hard, difficult journey of self-improvement and critical revisions. It is not easy. The author is candid and open in doing so,
often inclosing quite provocative quotes, but this is ultimately an effective way to prove that good design comes when there is genuine interest in achieving it, no matter what.

**PART 4: DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND IMPLICATIONS:**

This section summarises all lessons learned from the case studies. Organised through the important issues identified in Part 2, it lists strengths and weaknesses, expedients and solutions from all examples using their typological detail to give concrete illustrations.

It is effective in that joins values in housing and findings form research to design solutions; for example, the link between number of units served by a corridor is linked to effects on privacy and sense of neighbourliness. These are important issues but too often remain theoretical aspirations, whilst in this case the author manages to be very practical, and show ranges of implementation from all cases where these issues have been taken into account and resolved to variable degrees of success.

There is a degree of common sense across all lessons, but it is a useful common sense with explicit links to practice, and I would argue it is a much-needed common sense.

If things were so obvious in fact, why excellent housing is not standard practice after all?

**CONCLUSION**

Whilst acknowledging that the focus is on complex housing, and accepting that these are by definition significantly large projects, my query is on the resilience and flexibility over time of these urban and suburban investments. In several cases (i.e. De Muzen, Carnisselande, La Grande Cour... these have a significantly large footprint; they are, essentially, superblocks), so I would raise questions over their longevity: what happens when conditions change? will their complexity let them evolve along with different needs, requirements, budgets and interests? One can argue that the answer might be found in their intentionally planned complexity, but can we really plan complexity, or shall we accept that these are ‘special’ units, even if very good at that, and resilience might not be of concern to their regards? will they be still here in 200 years, same as much other admired Dutch more traditional, ordinary typologies? Does complexity require special forms, or can it be accommodated in more ‘ordinary’ ones? In other words, should we assess these complex housing against resilience, or do we accept that can play by different rules? And if so, why and where should we draw a line?

Overall, this is a useful book, an important resource for undergraduate and postgraduate students in architecture, urban design and planning, for developers, architects and municipalities. The author goes out of her way to discuss responsibilities and even stubbornness at times, and to show that the distance between an idea and its fulfilment is a hard one to bridge; her lessons are a step towards building this bridge.

**REFERENCES**