

From 10th to 12th May 1999, more than 70 housing experts from all parts of Europe, Japan and North America met in Dessau, Germany at the invitation of the EXPO 2000 Sachsen-Anhalt GmbH. The purpose was to discuss the future of the industrially produced housing estates in Europe. Members of TG26 participated in discussions regarding the transferability of Open Building principles, strategies and experiences to the refurbishment of large housing estates in Central and Eastern Europe.

The participants at the Conference issued a Declaration addressed to a broad range of private and public sector parties concerned with housing development.

Extracts are reproduced below.

The Dessau Declaration Refurbishment of large prefabricated housing estates

The Problem and the Assets

Industrial housing estates in Europe have social and physical problems that will only grow more severe in the future. In Central and Eastern Europe, more than 34 million people live in approximately 600 housing estates of over 2.500 units, which were built during the state socialist period. Including the States of the former USSR, the large prefabricated estates are the homes of 170 million people, which were built between the 1960s and 1990.

This habitat of large parts of the populations of Eastern European countries is severely endangered and needs to receive increased attention now.

The social situation is often deteriorating as the estates become victims of the social and economical polarisation within the emerging housing markets.

The inhabitants' lack of financial means, the problems of involving the financial sector on a long term basis and inadequate management structures after privatisation hinder the attempts that are undertaken by cities, owners and housing organisations to improve the living conditions on the estates.

The physical decay of the buildings and the technical infrastructure is progressing rapidly due to maintenance deficits and a lack of legal and administrative provisions to undertake the necessary repairs.

Ways Towards Solutions

The participants of the Conference agreed that a co-ordinated effort should be undertaken to renew the large prefabricated estates and to support their development. Experiences from Western European countries and East German States, and strategies of Open Building, can show visions for solutions.

It is possible to work on three levels in the built environment.

- The Tissue Level: The built urban environment is being renewed, with new landscaping, shops and community spaces; new relations between the estates and the towns and cities have to be found;
- The Support Level: The longer lasting parts are being upgraded, with new elevators, windows, roofs and exterior finishes;

- The Infill Level: The interiors of the dwellings are being upgraded in respect to changed demographics and needs, often respecting the individual wishes of the residents.

As important as the physical environment is the social and economic environment including the co-operation of house owners, tenants, and their participation in the planning and decision making process.

Now we have to enter a new phase of rehabilitation, formally organising decision-making, the revitalisation process and the building industry on three levels with a fundamentally new premise:

Tenants become responsible and can decide on everything behind their front door. They can also influence the larger public environment.

The implications of this approach are four-fold. With households in control of the infill - everything behind their front doors - the care and cultivation, so important to a vital residential environment, are greatly promoted.

A renewed building products industry, building trade skills and organisations can grow to supply the new and diverse demands and economic possibilities of the newly empowered occupants.

Renovation policies will be implemented supporting long term satisfaction of households of varying incomes.

As a result of increased decision power of households in their own dwellings, the public environment, governments and local authorities will more clearly reflect a sense of shared responsibility.

International Co-Operation

International co-operation to realise these objectives requires:

- bringing together owners, tenant organisations, designers, decision-makers, contractors, town planners from a variety of countries;
- developing training manuals for decision procedures, finance, design, construction and management;
- examples of best open building practices from other countries, including approaches such as the use of performance requirements in regulations and tendering and innovative financial schemes. These efforts should be brought together as soon as possible for demonstration projects - based on the local needs and local possibilities in the eastern part of Germany and in Eastern Europe.

The participants of this conference stress the need for international attention to the problem and want to suggest a more active involvement of the international community in preventing the large prefabricated housing estates from becoming an incalculable burden for the future of European urban development. A new comprehensive plan for the rehabilitation of the Eastern European housing stock is recommended.