

Housing estate

Generally speaking, a housing estate is first and foremost a land development and urbanisation operation. It consists in parcelling-off a plot of land, usually to build houses. Generally the land development operation concerns the subdivision of land identified on the cadastre (land register) as an unit or made up of contiguous units. Their purpose is variable: they may or may not have mains services laid on, they may be intended for rent, for sale, or as an investment. The operation is to be completed within a prescribed time-lapse, in France this is ten years.

However, the use of the term has become generic: it is used to describe a form of individual housing (detached houses and bungalows) characterised by a degree of homogeneity in the buildings, and by a geometric layout of the plots and street patterns (usually with series of loops, lollipops on a stick, dead-ends…). Cities have developed over history by successive phases of housing estates, in the UK, the USA, France – in fact in almost all settings of urban sprawl in developed countries. Numerous dense, central urban spaces today have their origins in housing estate operations – the built up areas of the second half of the 19th century in Paris, Bordeaux for a large part, and also Le VÃ©sinet or Aulnay-sous-Bois; in the USA, Harlem for instance results from a vast housing development dating from 1905. At the time the term housing estate was not used, but rather the word "allotment", and in Haussman's Paris "cours", "passages" or "villas", but the land development principles were the same. They were intended mostly for the middle-class populations wishing to leave the city centre for residential parks and the romantic suburbs in the 19th century (in particular in the UK and the USA), and then from the start of the 20th century for working populations, combining house and a patch of land, while the large estates on the outskirts for the middle classes generalised after 1945 (Levitt's "levittowns", see Jackson, 1985). This was based on three main underpinnings: mass credit, car ownership, and public grants (support for first house purchase, credit guarantees, funding of motorway projects etc). This way of producing mass housing diffused across the planet in similar forms, for instance the "commodity housing" in China. There is however an exception in the spontaneous, precarious housing developments in the megalopolises in developing countries.

The parcelling-off process characterising housing estates often generates a particular layout of the access roads and mains services. The organisation of the street plan is first of all intended to be economically rational (maximising the saleable surface area, and minimising the cost of infrastructures). But the street and plot layout may adopt different systems, sometimes depending on the inherited land-use structure: the grid layout and blocks in the USA, or the "forest avenues" in the second half of the 19th century in the Ile de France (Paris area). There was an inflection from the 1830s, and from 1850 in the USA, with the diffusion of landscaped estates with large villas or bijou residences inspired from the British cottage and adopting the style of the "romantic" suburbs, close to nature, making use of the proximity of the forest or leisure spaces (loops, series of "lollipops on a stick" or cul-de-sacs around golf courses for instance), as in the "new villages" of the 1960s. In the 1980s, defensible space theories (Newman, 1972), have been thoroughly applied, as a system of security standards, or of protection of the built-up environment reflecting the notions of space to be defended along with social control over the street (no-through-roads, cul-de-sacs). As a form of collective, horizontal housing development, the housing estate requires the establishment of collective facilities, infrastructures and amenities. When these are absent, forms of social and spatial relegation develop.

Thus the French housing estate or "lotissement" (dividing into lots) is above all a particular category in urban legislation. Comparable entities exist under other legal regimes – for instance in the USA there are subdivisions, while estates refer to a particular type of building project, and housing developments are a type of speculative development. Generally speaking, procedures evolved with the expansion of the residential suburbs from the end of the 19th century, and law-makers, in different settings, progressively established legislation and standards, which made it possible, among other things, to reduce the number of poor-quality estates. Developers normally have to comply with certain obligations in terms of services and amenities (public lighting, parking facilities etc.) and infrastructures (mains networks, roadways). In France housing estates have become the object of public policy focus following a wave of shoddy estates in the Paris suburbs and the claims of underprivileged populations in precarious housing with few or no services at the start of the 20th century (Fourcaut, 2000). These operations took place within a new legislative corpus obliging the developer to provide collective services before plots were sold (1924), and this enabled municipalities to fund the acquisition of unsold or poorly equipped plots (1973, 1976). This established the operational nature of housing estate development and its integration into the development plan for the municipal territory as a whole (decree of July 26 1977, amended in 1986). In the USA, the system used is fairly normative (there is frequent reference to American-type housing developments) and derives from practices in Europe. In the course of the 20TH century, each American State adopted legislation enabling the regulation and control of the design and any

modification to the subdivisions. The legislation specifies the development documents required (Parcel Maps, Tentative and Final Maps, for instance). The system all in all is very similar on the two side of the Atlantic. The legal texts generally make way for very large developments for planners with adequate mastery of land development issues. The different modes of regulation (ordinance in the USA, decree in France) require promoters and developers to submit binding urbanism documents specifying the different phases in the work to be undertaken, and the work required on infrastructures. They also require developers to take part in the provision of the necessary public services and amenities (either by direct funding (developer fees in the USA) or by ceding some plots to the municipality, or again by directly funding the construction of a school or a kindergarten. The ZAC (Zone d'aménagement concerté) is a zoning procedure in France used in particular for this purpose. Finally developers must specify how the common services and amenities are run and managed. There are in this case several type of status: either a (non-profit) association (joint ownership, condominium etc. depending on the setting) owns all the collective amenities, including the streets, or else streets can be treated as right of way. In the case of joint ownership, residing owners are by right members of the association, and the deeds for the plot concerned specify the terms of membership (McKenzie, 1994). As a space in which facilities and infrastructures are managed collectively, the housing estate almost systematically leads to various modes of management that are forms of private urban governance: joint ownership, owner associations, gated communities, collective systems of management of owner interests (Charmes, 2005; Le Goix, Webster, 2008), legal arrangements falling under the category of common interest developments (McKenzie, 1994). In a few instances, there is provision for retrocession to the public sphere, which can be demanded by the municipality after 10 years in France, under certain conditions.

Thus the housing estate is a strictly controlled operation, and a legal construction which makes it a specific type of space in the urban and peri-urban landscape. The dividing-up into plots assumes that there is control over the use of the land. This can be in the hands of local public authorities, such as a municipality (land-use plans and regulations, pre-emption rights, expropriation) or it can be in the hands of a private operator (land owner, estate developer, company, housing promoter).

The use of the term is often blurred by the different categories that it covers, and is also often used to describe various forms of residential building that resemble it. For instance, the statistics for building permits in France merely make the distinction between "individual" and "grouped individual" housing .

- The "individual" category considers both scattered individual housing, where the building permit is issued on an individual basis (a type of development that can cause what is known in French a "mitage" ; "moth-holing" in the urban fabric) and individual houses on housing estates. Here the development procedure is in two stages: there is a prior parcelling-out of the land, requiring a permit to do so, or a permit to develop, followed by individual constructions each subject to an individual building permit. In this case at least two parties are involved, the party that is the housing estate developer, who may be an independent owner, and then a contracting party to build the individual houses The future owner chooses from a builder's catalogue, or can self-build (Bourdieu, 2000).

- The "grouped individual" type of permit is considered separately. Plots are divided up a posteriori. A single grouped building permit is submitted, often by an operator or a single contractor (developer-promoter) and then the sale of the buildings proceeds in lots. These operations are those where the most marked architectural homogeneity can be seen, and are also referred to by default as "lotissements", where the notion of the parcelling out of plots is predominant. The three types differ considerably by way of their legal foundations, their production and localisation logic, the parties involved in their production, and the market segments they target (Callen, 2012; Vilmin, 2005).

By extension, the term housing estate has gradually become a generic term, and used to reflect the tensions of urban sprawl. It was thus criticised at an early stage, both for the urban morphology and for the social morphology produced by these mass housing developments. Lewis Mumford (1938, *The Culture of Cities*) thus made fun of suburbanites who were "copying the Romanticism of Byron and Lamartine", and in the 1950s and 1960s, the analysis of social stratification tends to confirm a type of urbanism based on the social homogeneity of residents, characterised by the "white flight" of the middle classes to the suburbs. In France, critics point to the shortfalls in terms of "urban-ness": "On account of the subdivisions of the land they create, the morphological and in some cases architectural discontinuities they generate, and the socio-demographic characteristics of the inhabitants in terms of age and social background, they are non-city. This lack of urban-ness is denounced by all observers" (Burgel, 1989, p.6). They are sometimes reduced to the archetype of individualism, withdrawal and "entre-soi", spaces with no qualities reduced to private, utilitarian, economic logics, contrasted with central spaces assumed to be open, busy and dense (Mangin, 2004). The housing estate is sometimes viewed as a category that sums up all the failings of the peri-urban sphere: generic places with defensive, security-based, community logics, or a logic of protection of property (Lévy, 2003). All these elements need to be included in the debate, since research has shown

that access to house ownership for middle class populations of varied origins is a powerful tool for social integration. This is of course variable according to groups, income, or ethnic background, for instance in the USA (Alba, 1999; Clark, 2006; Massey, 1988). Finally, as a massive land development operation associated with access to house ownership and mass credit, the housing estate as a mass housing "product", linked to household debt and public grants for acceding to house ownership, is a potent means of transferring land revenues to the global financial system (Langley, 2006).

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