

The History of the terraced form - Lecture by Stefan Muthesius, author of The English Terraced House, given at the Design for Homes Joined-up Housing conference, Nov 2000.

This Design for Homes CPD credit should take you about half an hour to go through.

I am very honoured and very flattered to speak to architects as an architectural historian. I am always hesitant, speaking to architects. On the one hand, I am firmly convinced that we have one important thing in common: we use our eyes. On the other hand, our aims are very different indeed: I am dealing with facts of the past and you are dealing with the facts of the present and the future. The really difficult issue, however, in the architectural historian's relationship with the architect, is that the architectural historian does not only deal with historical facts but also with the history of value judgments and this is a very, very complex history

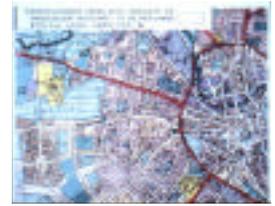
I just want to mention that I have also, with Miles Glendinning, published a book on tower blocks, on the history of tower blocks (Tower Block: Modern public housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, 1994). In this book we have tried to make it absolutely clear that we do not want to come out either in favour or against that type of building, and if you come here to hear from me that the terraced house is a good kind of dwelling, I must disappoint you. I want to try my utmost to come out neither in favour nor against it - I might let you into a little secret here and just tell you that our book on tower blocks sold far fewer copies than our book on terraced houses.

I am concerned with the history of the facts, with the plans, the history of the plans, the way the houses look, the way they are built, etc. But I am also concerned about the history of the evaluations that were made subsequently of those old houses. The fact is that during the 20th Century, or, let us say from 1890 to 1970, no serious architect would touch the terraced house type. There were no terrace houses built seriously for a long period during the 20th Century. In 1937, when the picture of an area of small terraced houses in Preston was published you architects wanted to pull all these terraced houses down and build blocks of flats instead.

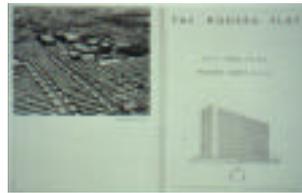
I show you my street (1) in Norwich, which is a pleasant street - I think I am allowed a personal value judgement at this point - Now you planners, you city architects, you deputy-city architects, you assistants to the deputy-city architects, you wanted to pull all this down. I am showing you a section of map (2) taken from a large book entitled The Norwich Plan, of 1945, where all areas with houses like this were coloured with pink stripes and where they were characterised as 'obsolete or obsolescent buildings to be re-planned with all local amenities'. The planners did not tie themselves down that they were going to pull them all down, they probably knew that there would not be the money to do this in the end, but they were all considered obsolescent or obsolete. That is what you town planners and architects had in mind in 1945. (3)



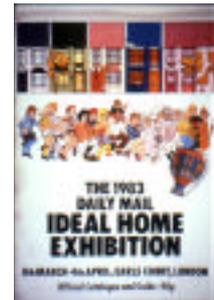
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Where do we go from here? A recent book by Alison Ravetz published in the 1990s shows a picture of very regular late-Georgian row of houses and adds a caption: 'the by-law terrace at its dreariest: Stockton'. Now I do not want to make value judgments, I leave it up to you whether you find that street dreary. I do not, though I must add that I have the greatest respect for my co-researcher, Alison Ravetz and her numerous books on the history of housing. The next photograph by Roger Mayne, taken in 1960, of a London Street, (6): did Mayne want to show it as dreary street, or a lively street? Was it meant to be a good or bad example? When we reach the 1980s, there is absolutely no doubt that the terraced house is back in fashion again. (4) Therefore from now on I shall leave this aspect aside and talk about the type of building as such.

Our most frequently asked and most basic question is, of course: Why do the English insist on the terraced house? My next illustration is of a short terrace - You would never guess where they are: it is on the Falkland Islands! So it must be a favourite type of house if people in that distant part go to all the trouble and build a little terrace looking like their houses at home in London. So, again, why do we build terraced houses in England (and not, as you know, nor in most parts of the Continent)? This is a hugely complicated question. The question, I think, could be turned upside down and you could ask: why did they turn - in many parts,

but not all parts of the Continent – towards high density building of blocks of flats in larger towns during the 19th century? Why did they NOT continue building the smaller suburban houses in Berlin or in Paris or in Amsterdam in the late 19th Century? (5) This was a question which exercised many Continental town planners in the early years of the 20th century. One major argument was that land prices in those Continental cities were comparatively far higher than in England. The next question is, of course, why? The ultimate answer these people came up with was that it was the custom of building which brought with it higher land prices. Thus ultimately is the custom of building, which I am afraid is not a very satisfactory explanation, but because of the lack of time we will leave it like that and go on to try some other explanations why we turned to the terraced house or why we continued with the terraced house in England in the later 19th Century.

We did build blocks of flats in the second half of the 19th Century but those flats were rather special buildings, they were either for the very low income bracket of people, and they often showed a great lack of privacy, and for this and many other reasons could not form a model for a general housing for the lower middle classes or the middle middle classes. The other type of flats in London, in the best parts of London were really complicated machines and were extremely expensive to build and required an architect to plan them. They could not be planned by an ordinary builder or the ordinary client, and they could thus not form a model for general housing either. Lastly, we have to be aware that the larger, inner suburban terraced houses in London, did not usually constitute single family dwellings. Most of these houses were multi-occupied. For this situations you can see parallels in Amsterdam, where there is a kind of transition between a terraced house and a block of flats, recognizable though the grouped entrances, i.e. 'front doors', on the street. At the back of some late 19th century terraces in London you can observe outside toilets on three floors.

All this, however, does not affect the basic fact of the terraced house building in England. We must search for this intrinsic factors which have made the type popular for occupants and builders alike. The terraced house is such a simple type, we may say, in that a two-up/two-down cottage in Lancashire and a six-storey 'machine' in South Kensington show the same basic morphology. But I think this is a rather abstract kind of analysis and again it does not really explain that much. A more pertinent fact is the way in which the four traditional 'classes' of London houses, i.e. the high and the low house, hardly vary in their plot widths. Thus the terraced house was a convenient type for the planner, for the surveyor, for the estate manager, because virtually the same plot could be built on with different sizes. In the very late 19th Century the terraced house proved, I think, a convenient type to include all the new sanitary facilities. The byelaws, as we know them, were essentially created in the second half of the 19th century and our convenient type could



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easily accommodate these new-fangled ideas about health, water supply and so forth. Modern conveniences like the bath, piped water supply and so forth could relatively easily be accommodated in this flexible type, at least into its larger versions. The really crucial moment in the building of the mass terraced house came, I believe, quite late: it was the boom of 1890-1900, when, whoosh, the streets with their endless rows spread out of the cities.

I do not have much time left. I want to leave behind those questions, problems and evaluations and historical explanations and now I just want to look at the outside of the houses. In London and in our favourite watering places, Brighton or Hastings, we see the peaks 19th century terraced housing of the Regency and the Victorian periods. However, I should like to leave the metropolis because I would like to plead that the most exciting housing of this late 19th Century, in purely architectural terms, is not to be found in London but in numerous provincial cities. My two favourite towns of the late Victorian and Edwardian period are Cardiff and Portsmouth - for historical reasons that have to do with wealth derived from ships, of course.. If you go into the areas of 1900 housing in Cardiff, you will find a very, very considerable amount of building craftsmanship. (7)

If you count the number of materials and techniques that are contained in such a façade, it is quite considerable. Or, as you see here in Portsmouth, you find the occasional covering of the façades in white glazed brick, producing a great unity of effect on those façades. (8)

One of my favourite towns is Reading (9). What you get here is a kind of belt, a circle, around London, where each town has its own variety of brick and brickwork, its particular colour of brick. In Reading it was the 'silver gray' that was the pride of that town and it occurs in innumerable variations, combined with red and white brick, stonework, woodwork, etc, in

the smaller houses of the inner suburbs of that city.

When you go to Luton you have the celebrated Luton purple brick (10). That again can be varied quite a lot on the façades of small houses. You can see here we have no stonework, we have only brick. There was a bit of a wrangle, I think, between the building material suppliers in the various industries, the various craftsmen, so you find a lot of façades where various materials are combined and you find a lot of façades where they stick to one material but all the more important was the colouring. Thus mostly we have the walls in purple and the trim in red, in Luton, but just occasionally we have the walls in red and the trim in purple.

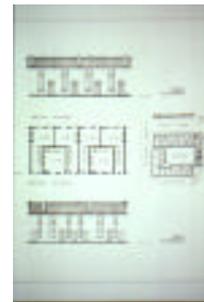
In Norwich we can observe a peculiar insistence on the front of the house being in white brick – that was a smarter brick, it looked more like stone, it was corresponding of course to the London stock brick. In London, as you know, during the 19th Century we would find virtually no red brick. So in Norwich, which was really a red brick country, we have the white brick for the front and we have the red brick for the back (11). This is fine if you see just the front and you don't see the back. But if you see the house from the side you meet a very complex thinking; where exactly do you end the white brick and you start the red brick. So this is the smart street, the bigger street, this way, so you have the white brick going round this corner here, you have the front wall in white and the side wall in red, and the side wall here in red with white window arches. The chimney at the back of course is in red and the chimney at the front is in gray. On occasions we might find the front of the chimney in white and the back and sides of the chimney in red. In Ipswich people usually strove to differ from the people of Norwich and we find houses with red brick on the front and white at the back. In Peterborough, by 1900 the heart of England's brick industry, we may find a house with red bricks on the front and yellow bricks on the side, and next door a house with yellow bricks on the front and red ones on the side.

When we leave Southern England, we will not have much of this play of colours on the façade but of course we have those famous varieties of plans of the very small houses. You have all seen or heard of the back to backs in the West Riding of Yorkshire. My favourite type is one that can be found only in Rochdale (12). where you find there are two through houses combined with one unit of a back to back. To be more precise, one unit of a back to back row is slotted into the space that is formed by the back extensions of two through houses, where each of these through houses would have its back yard. Thus from the front this looks like an ordinary row of terraced houses. It is when we look at the back elevation that we are baffled. You have the rear end of the through houses, with those little windows and those little doors – there is a little scullery there – and you have the front of the half back to back house in between, with a proper window and a proper door, so you are looking at the back of houses and at the front

of houses at the same time, except that those houses of which this is their front do not actually have a back because they are slotted into this complex. It is the topological complexity, the topological nightmare, you might say, which I think makes this type of building so intriguing.



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I have nearly come to the end. These are some of my favourites. I am not supposed to say that but anyway there we are, I am, of course speaking as an architectural historian, not as an architect or critic. I started with problems, the problems of evaluation and the history of evaluation, the way 30 years ago you, the planners and architects wanted to pull down all the terraces and now you want to build them again. There is another problem, the problem of conservation. This is a picture of some small Norwich houses which I took in about 1975 (13) and these are the same houses as they appeared last week (14). Here I think we are really stuck: what can we do about this disfigurement? Who is to be blamed? It cannot be the architects, nor can it be the architectural historian. But maybe you architects do have a role in this: You can build decent new terraces, so that people also appreciate the good old ones!