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Summaries in English

Individual rowhouses

by François Maurice, architect FAS
(see page 1047)

Swiss cities are expanding on ever more restricted areas. At the same time the percentage of people who wish to live in a home of their own is constantly growing. Moreover, there are no building codes applying to individual rowhouses.

In short, these are the considerations that have induced us to concentrate on this problem.

Property and freedom

The number of people in a position to own real estate is constantly growing. This is due in part to the fact that sites are being divided up into ever smaller allotments. This desire for private home ownership is due, in the case of many people, to considerations of social status, and this is broadly exploited by real estate publicity. Without wishing to go so far as to think that every villa owner is dreaming of moving into a château (his own idea of a château, to be sure), it must be admitted that, among the advantages gained there ought to be mentioned at least the right freely to choose the design of the house, the style of the entrance or the colour of the driveway surface.

Now then, the rowhouse alignment entails the abandonment of this right, since, up to the present time in any case, the houses in one and the same group are of similar architecture (it is required by law). But the depersonalization of the individual home that has taken place is much more difficult to admit, for the most part, than that of an anonymous residential block, even one containing condominium flats.

Other solutions can be envisaged. For example, row allotments with sale of plots not bound by any prescribed architecture, or even the sale of buildings inside which each resident could have his own flat constructed, or again, the application of a flexible industrial construction procedure.

Real estate publicity as well will have to think up more objective slogans, which it has, in fact, already started to do by employing terms like "village cottage" or "town house".

Compensatory environment

In former times, the majority of men worked in the fields. They went out on foot. The village or the walled town was for them the ideal solution of their immediate problems of communication and protection.

At the present time, activities are collective, most of them being concentrated in the cities. There is friction everywhere. Physical isolation has practically disappeared from our lives, all the more so as the means of communication have multiplied.

To the extent that the residence is expected to serve as a complementary or compensatory environment to counteract the conditions of working life, the growing fondness for the individual residence, based on the quest for solitude and tranquility, is a consequence of contemporary life.

Whether it is a case of atavism or the need for physical exercise, cultivation of the soil (or rather gardening) can also become an important reason for living on the outskirts, where one can own a bit of ground. Nevertheless, it sometimes happens that the consequence of the concentration of activities in the city is the occupation of available sites on the urban periphery. The result is that only a great distance between the urban centre and the residence can sometimes guarantee peace and quiet. However, this distance is costly and time-consuming.

The ordinary man nowadays is consequently oblig-

ed to be satisfied with intermediate solutions, that is to say, with finding a home that is as individual as possible, on a rather restricted site. The function therefore of the architect will be to propose maximum isolation of housing units with external extensions, within a rather dense complex. This problem has already been given a number of happy solutions.

Building codes

Custom and the codes now in force have set up two clearly different types of housing: the apartment house and the individual villa residence. This legislation leaves no room for the intermediate solution represented by the rowhouse alignment. This is determined, in Geneva, by legal provisions covering urban zones which provide for a density of 0.2. Now then, in order for a villa, on a traditional allotment, to have the necessary minimum space, it ought to occupy a site having a minimum area of 1200 m², co-holdings included, which corresponds to the right to build, in theory, 240 m² of floor surface, this being an area rarely attained by ordinary houses.

Experience shows that, in a row allotment, a site area that is twice as small, or 600 m² per house, is sufficient, and that it is possible to build there a unit that is larger than 120 m². This advantage is also accompanied by economies stemming from co-ownership or from common installations, such as heating, accesses, power lines, garages, etc.

At the present time, the obstacles encountered by the promoters of row complexes are too numerous, even though such constructions remain exceptional and many projects are never realized. In other words, the economic advantages that might accrue from their realization are not sufficient in the present-day context.

F.M.

Swiss national myths and realities

by Jean-Marc Lamunière
(see page 1052)

This issue is devoted to individual rowhouses, and we think it is important to give the floor to an expert who is not afraid to come out with a critical point of view, his criticism at times even being severe. This expert is Jean-Marc Lamunière, architect FAS, whose study is summarized below.

These brief notes do not pretend to make any comment on projects that appear in this issue, of which in any case the author is ignorant. At the most they attempt to put the whole housing problem into a historical perspective. It is possible to take a large view of a subject above and beyond its simple range of practical realizations, which, in this case, quickly becomes very restricted. Indeed it is surprising to see the formal limits which have been imposed on rowhouse alignments: unidirectionality of the general plan, staggering of floors in accordance with the contours of the site, unilateral service roads, modular coordination oriented to the interval between the supporting party walls, duplex units juxtaposed but rarely superimposed or incorporated, etc.

In my opinion, it is extremely difficult and dangerous, as is often done, to group in categories of "urban type units" examples of low-density rowhouse alignments. When this is done, there is a mixture of different social and economic levels. It is a well-known fact, moreover, that these formalistic studies share in the dissociation between architecture and urbanism, but people fail to realize the dialectical relationship between the two.

For example, the houses adjacent to one another in

the fortified medieval town do not display the same urbanistic content as the brownstone rowhouses in the geometrical plan of an American city. The rules of architectural composition are quite different in the two cases. However, they share the same production and exchange potentialities as do the cities in which they occur. Totally different is the case of working-class residential districts, with individual rowhouses, reflecting the rise of industrial capitalism and the division of labour. Here housing is separated from other urban activities; there is left only a small vegetable plot, which serves as a kind of compensation.

This latter model, imitated in recent projects and emptied of its content, can serve for comparative purposes. However, there is an important difference between the rowhouses of the English-speaking countries and the rowhouse alignments in central and southern Europe. One kind continues to recognize the street as the bilateral and symmetrical axis of the driveways and the house plans, whereas the other kind is detached from this axis and is unilaterally oriented.

It may astonish one that such a typology has been so successful in Switzerland, in the sixties, but it developed in terms of equivocal aims, more bound up with zoning policy and the trend in the real estate market than with any new urbanistic problem. Some people have thought that there is a national quality involved here: the judicious use of a rugged country, the use of forests as limits to housing developments, a pragmatic attitude caught up between mass production methods and traditional building materials.

But there is another way of looking at the problem; this type of housing in Switzerland carries an ideological message, with democratic socialism and dynamic capitalism both contributing. This development has run parallel to the evolution of society. These ideas have become emptied of their content and no longer even seek to express certain myths implicit in the "housing project". Thus co-ownership has been transformed into a more direct system of ownership that is more tied to the soil. We are half-way between cooperative and private ownership. At ground level, the site is almost entirely subdivided into private enclosed gardens, while the public area is reserved for the whole group of residents, a kind of courtyard. Industrialized production of standardized elements is reduced to a repetitive operation by way of a rather summary modular coordination based on the housing unit considered as the minimum cell. The high-rise is reduced to the horizontal, durable materials are employed, in accordance with the rule of a free market economy which makes the resident invest in his concrete shelter which stabilizes his investment. The possibilities of development and transformation, via a free plan or more flexible building methods, are reduced to a few schematic types of interiors. Variations on the outside are not much tolerated; exteriors are regulated. The complex is supposed to present a homogeneous image, progressive or conventional, it does not matter, expressing the social class that lives there and that discovers there the identity that they think they have established by a seemingly free choice.

Thus the model has remained stationary, enclosed within the real estate market that has promoted it. The real estate market has organized the commercial production of housing, but it has not yet come up with concrete urbanistic proposals. It is not even certain that it has succeeded in rationalizing single-family housing. Many communities and residents are opposed to it. The economies realized are questionable.

Jean-Marc Lamunière