# Renewing Europe’s Housing

Richard Turkington and Christopher Watson (eds.)

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The aim of this book is ‘to provide contemporary accounts of housing renewal and practice’ in Europe. It contains articles describing housing and urban renewal policies in nine European countries, five from Northern and Western Europe, two from Eastern and Central Europe and two from Southern Europe. The countries involved are Denmark, England, France, the Netherlands, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Spain and Turkey. Besides chapters with introduction and conclusions there is a special chapter on ‘Changing approaches to policy making in housing renewal’. The individual chapters are research based but the book as a whole is not the outcome of a cross-national research project with common objectives, methodology and definitions. The term ‘Housing renewal’ is used to describe both renewal of single properties and broader area improvements.

The authors consider that housing and urban renewal is of crucial importance for the development of housing in times where building on new land makes up an increasingly limited contribution to overall housing provision in many countries. They find that the subject has been relatively neglected in political and academic circles. This has been manifested in a lack of comparative research where the last similar publication was published in 1999.

In spite of growth in incomes and wealth in Europe the authors conclude that housing renewal remains a serious challenge. Basic installations like bathrooms and heating are available in most housing but poor maintenance is a widespread problem, especially in neighbourhoods with a concentration of low-income households. This is often connected to problems of segregation and concentration of poverty that creates combined social, health and physical problems in deprived neighbourhoods. The authors state that there seem to be differences between countries regarding to what extent deterioration of housing is accepted. Decay appears to be more tolerated in Southern Europe and in East and Central European countries, where it concerns mass housing from the socialist era. Problems with lack of institutional and legal structures, which are still unsolved in many of these countries, combined with limited government efforts to counteract the problems, offer a bleak lookout for housing improvement in the future. However, problems with energy conservation are gaining increasing importance in all countries.

Most countries have seen a withdrawal of state involvement in housing over the last 20-30 years and this has also been the case for renewal policies concerning maintenance and improvements of the existing stock. In all countries improvement of housing areas and buildings has been achieved as a part of holistic area-based interventions where physical improvements are combined with social and economic initiatives. In a few countries demolition has been part of the efforts. There have been extensive evaluations of the projects but these are usually limited to the period where the efforts have been carried through. Many of the chapters talk about the difficult task of making a marked change in the status of neighbourhoods and many of the estates discussed have been subject to multiple renewal efforts. One conclusion drawn is that the long-term stigmatisation of an area may be very difficult to change unless one takes the path of gentrification and displacement of residents.

The book shows, as do earlier publications on the subject (Skifter Andersen and Leather 1999, Priemus and Metselaar 1992), that maintenance and renewal of the built environment is a complex undertaking involving many different problems and tasks. Problems of urban decay differ very much across countries and so do the understanding of why they appear and what to do about them. Problems are closely connected to the way housing markets are organized and policies are to some extent path dependent. Policies in a country develop in certain directions dependent on earlier renewal programs and as a result, policies still differ greatly across countries. However, it is claimed in the book that there is now more common ground between countries in the practice of housing and urban renewal than was found in the two earlier studies.

The great variation of urban renewal objectives and policies across countries demonstrates the lack of understanding of why problems of building deterioration and urban decay appear in market societies and what to do about them. Publically financed interventions in the property market are decided as a result of currently observed problems and are not based on a comprehension of the market failures that create them. Some of these challenges are related to low incomes but if the market was working properly this should be solved by providing housing benefits to residents and not by providing subsidies for renewing buildings. It is a regrettable fact that the housing research community in Europe has shown little interest in this subject, aside from consideration of the causes of area deprivation connected to processes of segregation. Especially disappointing is the lack of interest shown by economists. In the US there has been more research on causes on urban decay (e.g. Griegsby et. al., Skifter Andersen 2003). .

This book is a useful description of urban and housing renewal in nine countries with very different preconditions and thus provides a broad introduction to the many different aspects of this field in Europe.

**References**

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