



Heritage Protection as Progressive Urbanism? Defending the Legacies of the Welfare State

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Viewpoint

Berlin heritage

There are three World Heritage Sites in Berlin – can you guess what they are? You might expect to discover that, first, Museum Island and, second, the Palaces of Potsdam and Berlin are included on the list. But you might be more surprised by the third site – Berlin Modernism Housing Estates, six housing estates constructed between 1910 and 1933, principally from the period of the Weimar Republic. They are claimed to testify to innovative housing policies in a period when the city of Berlin was particularly progressive socially, politically and culturally. Together they ‘contributed to improving housing and living conditions for people with low incomes through novel approaches to town planning, architecture and garden design’ also providing ‘exceptional examples of new urban and architectural typologies’, which ‘exercised considerable influence on the development of housing around the world’ (UNESCO, 2008).

Housing crisis

The heritage of social housing seems particularly important in a moment when the availability of affordable, decent housing is a crisis issue in many countries. Writing from a British perspective, twentieth century social housing before 1979 – and the election of the Thatcher government which heralded a radical break from post-war consensus politics – speaks to a period when there was a widely held political aspiration to provide decent and better housing for all. Whilst the results were mixed, the best examples, now often given heritage status, show a scale of ambition, generosity and social priority that is difficult to imagine in the contemporary world. In England the ‘Post-war listing’ programme has positioned state heritage protection as an unlikely advocate and defender of the diminishing material and symbolic legacy of the architecture of the welfare state from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The legacies of this period are very different between different countries, but in many cases examples of such buildings are being formally protected as heritage. This opens-up important issues of how this period of planning history is framed,

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understood and valued within contemporary society. For example, do we consider material legacies of this period as important purely in terms of design, or is the social intent of the period of equal importance in our appreciation of such environments today?

The potential consequences of heritage protection for social housing – and its potential to contribute to more progressive urban outcomes – was the focus of my Leibniz Research Alliance Fellowship in June 2025 based at ZZF in Potsdam. The aim was to begin to extend the work we have undertaken in England (While and Pendlebury, 2025) to the German context, in the expectation that the different political context of both the creation of welfare state architecture and its subsequent political positioning will show elements of transnational overlap but also significant difference. Of particular interest in the case of Germany are the different histories – and trajectories – between the east and west of the country. And my first task, focusing on Berlin, was to try and understand something of the history and heritage status of the social housing in the city.

More berlin housing heritage

Whilst Berlin's history of innovation in social housing came to an abrupt stop under National Socialism, it returned with force in both Berlins in the 1950s. In West Berlin, this was exemplified by an international competition for the Hansa Quarter. The International Building Exhibition (INTERBAU) includes social housing blocks by eminent German architects, including the returning Walter Gropius as well as international figures such as Arne Jacobsen, Alvar Aalto and Oscar Niemeyer, although perhaps the most famous consequence of the exhibition was built elsewhere – the Le Corbusier reworking of the Unite d'Habitation. The counterpoint in the east, with an equal level of ambition but very different architectural approach, was the monumental series of blocks aligned along Stalinallee (now Karl Marx Allee), influenced by socialist urbanism and classicism. The combined innovation of new social housing methods and typologies from east and west has led to unsuccessful attempts to be included on Germany's tentative list of future World Heritage Sites.

After the construction of the Berlin Wall, the large-scale construction of social housing continued in new forms in both territories until the Wall's fall. In part this took the form of large-scale peripheral estates. In the west these were pushed out to the south (Gropiusstadt) the west (Falkenhagener Feld) and most monumentally to the north (Märkisches Viertel). In the east the later peripheral estates were grouped around the areas of Marzahn, Hellersdorf and Hohenschönhausen. Although not yet generally defined as heritage, a few buildings in these estates have been given monument status. Alongside the construction of peripheral estates there were also redevelopment efforts of social housing in the inner city. The best known of these is the International Building Exhibition (IBA) which ran in West Berlin during the 1980s, using the concepts of 'careful urban renewal' and 'critical reconstruction.' International celebrity architects on this occasion included Rob Krier, Charles Moore and Aldo Rossi, representing a distinct postmodern turn. Not surprisingly, some of these works now have heritage status.

Although German reunification and in the case of Berlin the 'stitching back together' of a divided city is to be celebrated, reunification also led to the cessation of significant social housing building programmes in Berlin, albeit a decade later than with the conservative, neo-liberal political turn in the UK. The reasons for this are not simple, but initially housing demand was low, accompanied by high costs for reconnecting a city systematically severed for 45 years which led to the sell off of assets, including housing. Whilst in Berlin the provision of affordable housing today is perhaps less of a crisis issue than in many British cities, and London specifically, that there is a problem is clear. Despite its innovative and generous history of housing provision and a history of renting and protection for renters, Berlin has not been immune from global neo-liberal forces driving the commodification of housing. Do the protected legacies of earlier eras have any role to play in resisting these changes?

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Historic building conservation is normally perceived as something conservative, rather than as a site of resistance in the city. However, preserved fragments of social housing stand as material testimony to periods when providing decent housing for all was a widely held political and social priority. Furthermore, protecting buildings for heritage purposes potentially challenges market hegemony, disrupting normal processes of capital accumulation. This may be part of the reason, along with a lingering antagonism to the material legacies of the welfare state ('concrete monstrosities'), why the government in England has distinctly cooled on extending protection to more post-war social housing in recent years. Robin Hood Gardens by Alison and Peter Smithson is the most well-known casualty, making way for a high-density area regeneration programme. Furthermore, some of the estates in London that do have protection through listing have been fully gentrified through radical tenure changes. But in our article (While and Pendlebury, 2025), we argue there may be tactical possibilities for resistance, a basis for community engagement, and a more local and bespoke approach to regeneration.

And in Berlin?

It is difficult to resist the juggernaut of neo-liberal housing policies that in many countries have made our houses commodities rather than homes. However, my preliminary impression of Berlin in comparison to England is of a generous and independent approach to heritage listing, of an inspirational history of innovation and provision of social housing, of a tradition of renting and protecting renters' rights and, importantly, of a history of civic mobilisation and resistance that cumulatively make me feel optimistic of the progressive potential of Berlin's rich history of social housing in providing some resistance to these global forces.

Disclosure statement

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