Architecture: Tall Housing Rises in Europe

Skyscraper Complex Is Revolutionizing Way People Live

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The skyscraper, an American invention, is finding a new destiny in Europe. It is being used for housing, on a huge scale and in radical forms that are having a revolutionary effect on the landscape and the way people live.

These are not urban skyscrapers, as city dwellers know them. They are towers, or point blocks, as they are called in Europe, or slabs, reaching the length of a city block, from 9 to 20 stories high. Stark, bold, dramatic intruders on the pastoral scene, they rise from open land and green hills. They are the world of the future come to roost in a farmyard or a field.

Of all the new European developments in housing and planning just visited by a touring group of leading American builders, this is by far the most spectacular trend. The buildings seen, ranging from brutal to beautiful, were the most provocative stops on the trip.

The Danes, for example, are proceeding to make the same mistakes in their newest high-rise housing that the United States has made in the last 30 years. They are heading straight for the kind of overscaled, impersonal, psychologically destructive buildings that have contributed substantially to social problems in American cities But they are doing it with much more style.

Danes Put Up Huge Slabs

Gladsaxe, 15 miles from Copenhagen, is a sophisticated architectural version of 1984. In construction now by a private builder with planning approval from both Gladsaxe and Copenhagen, it consists of huge slabs in flat fields. Five 16-story slabs line up straight for a distance of 2,100 feet, each one 300 feet long. Two nine-story slabs are slightly offset. There will be 10 four-story slabs at right angles.

These slabs are aligned with formal, rigid, relentless horizontality. All in a row, they pack a tremendous dramatic impact. They also freeze the soul. In the architects' renderings, even the trees line up the same way.

They use the most advanced technology. These are prefabricated "element buildings" with wall and floor sections factory-made and site-assembled, erected at the rate of four flats a day. Man-hours on the site are reduced one-third over conventional methods. The geometric module design of the balconied facades makes smashing abstract patterns. They are a photogenic wonder.

Standing on the striking balconies and looking down their 300-foot length, the effect is not unlike jailblock promenades where prisoners take the air. Builders' economies have stripped bathrooms to house-of-detention austerity. In those buildings still under construction, there is already vandalism.

Gladsaxe succeeds in abstract esthetics and technology, but it fails in the human and sociological aspects of planning and design. It illustrates the danger point in large-scale housing, where architecture and the individual lose contact. People rebel, antisocially, against the inhuman, beautiful rendering or the inhuman, standardized product.

Somehow, the Finns know this. Finland has the happiest, most human housing in northern Europe. This is equally true of the new high-rise buildings, which they handle with gentle skill.

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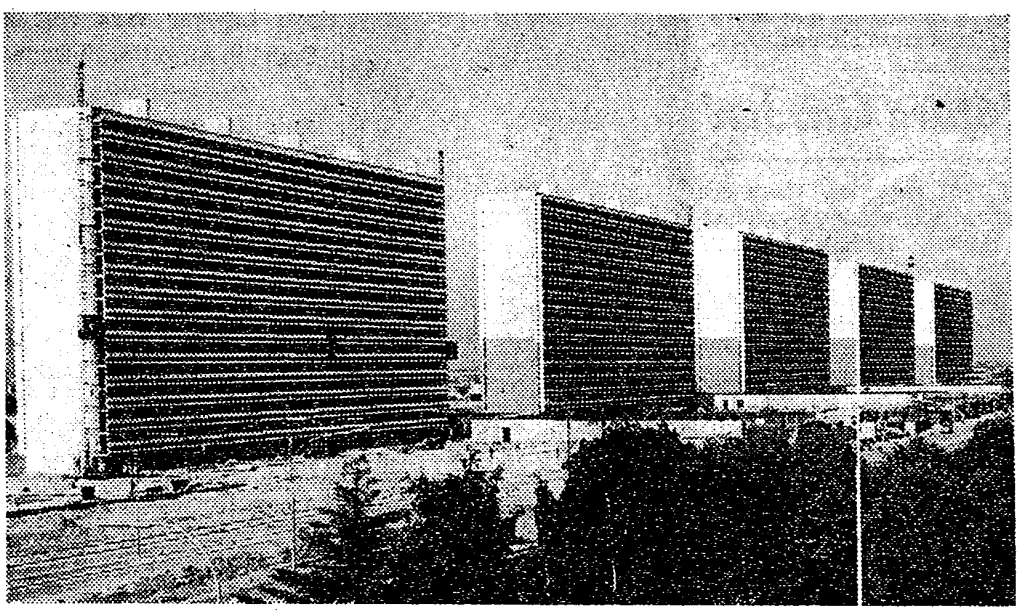
In Taby, a new suburb of Stockholm, distinctive apartment buildings are arranged in group of four curved structures, housing 5,000 people, and a group of eight towers for 3,000 people, five of which are shown at the lower left. A racetrack is behind open oval.



Palle Hestbech

At Gladsaxe, about 15 miles from Copenhagen, five 16-story slabs, each 300 feet long, extend in tandem. Buildings are of prefabricated parts, factory-made and site-assembled.

At Pihlajamaki, within sight of Helsinki, the towers are only nine stories high, but their verticality and modernity are uncompromising. The houses cap the hills and rocky outcroppings; their height emphasizes panoramic views of birches and pines.

Facing south, the facades are open, balconied and generously glassed. North facades are severe barriers, lit by vertical slit windows in service areas. These, too, are element buildings, of prefabricated parts.

In Sweden, the trend is also toward large-scale housing. Just beyond Stockholm's government-planned satellite towns, but still in the suburban area, are two striking examples: Nasbydal and Grinthorp, where 8,000 people live in 12 buildings.

Nasbydal and Grinthorp are part of a completely new community called Taby, which will be one-third the size of Stockholm on completion. It has a railroad now, and will have an extension of the subway by 1975.

On former farmland, literally across the railroad tracks, the world of tomorrow is here today —Nasbydal's eight towers stand in a circle like some skyscraper Stonehenge.

Grinthorp, just beyond, is even more startling. Five thousand people are housed in four curved buildings arranged in an open oval. The structures, open-ended crescents facing each other in high and low pairs, suggest an even more mystic arrangement than the towers. They are not more than 10 stories high, but they are a walled city block in length.

The implications of anonymity and standardization could be frightening here, but Grinthorp gives more the effect of a desirably tight-knit community than of regimented living. The distances between buildings are well calculated, close enough for a sense of contact, far enough apart for privacy and outlook.

The attractive design breakup of the continuous facades clearly indicates human scale and human activities. There are no long corridors in the long buildings. Small elevator halls open to pairs of apartments, light, airy and splendidly open to the view, that are the full width of the slab.

This kind of mammoth-scale housing can work well or it can be a disaster. The best European examples are prophetic exercises in advanced technology and contemporary living.