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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Nov 16, 1970; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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The British Government has predicted a housing surplus by 1973. In three years, it claims, there will be a 6 per cent surplus, or 1 million homes over households. Public response has been quick and contentious. The Government has been accused of everything from falsifying to politicizing the figures, and London and other large cities where congestion and decay are still epidemic find them a bitter joke.

But the fact remains that Britain, through sponsorship, subsidies and huge direct building programs including new towns, has constructed an extraordinary amount of housing in recent years. Good, bad and indifferent—and it is all three—it is there. The critics are saying that much of it is in the wrong place, or of the wrong kind, for the wrong people, at the wrong price. Many aspects of the program are far from a rousing success.

To those Americans for whom housing is nonexistent or unaffordable, and who see production stalled by fiscal, social and inflationary factors compounded by government, builder and voter inertia, the current British arguments about variety of choice sound like a fairy tale or the Promised Land. The subject here is shelter, not "formalistic" architecture or "paternalistic" planning. The focus is still on how to build at all, and the kind of desperate numbers game in which quality doesn't count. New Yorkers have even stopped counting.

The first pitifully limited steps toward the massive attack that must be made to break the housing logjam nationally in the United States are only being taken now. HUD's Operation Breakthrough is a belated attempt to encourage industrialized building; the New York State Urban Development Corporation has sizable housing programs. It is an American tradition to lag after Britain by about a quarter of a century. We will make our own mistakes—the same ones.

If we would look overseas—at the results rather than at the statistics—there are lessons begging to be learned. For an American, the first impact is simply that Britain builds: London has vast, controversial housing "estates," while New York languishes. Birmingham has almost cleared its slums in a spectacular statistical triumph; American cities add to impacted rot and despair.

The faults behind the figures have been summarized recently by the British professional magazine, the Architectural Review. Birmingham's center city slum clearance and new peripheral housing destroys what we now identify as "community" and forces workers to travel to jobs. The renewal process has created the 20th century non-city. It has raised disturbing questions about the relationship of modern moral alienation to the new alienated living patterns.

A comparison between London and New York at this time, in housing terms, is both enlightening and frightening. London now offers an educational series of housing successes and failures and some paradigmatic models of how not to create an environment.

The failures are often primarily environmental. The rebuke in one London development, Camelot Street, is less in the bleak, cost-accounting, matched high-rise prefabs than in what the Review calls the "cultural infrastructure" created around and below them: "two proud gasometers, one diminutive row of stuccoed villas, one bedizened pub and a thundering highway." In Battersea, Aylesbury's sea of mix-match, standardized facades is "an Orwellian prophecy fulfilled; inhuman, towering tenements 'glowering across the tracks," its site-plan trapping the noise of rushing trains.

And what about that great hope and absolute necessity, systems building? Britain has it on massive and edifying view. In London alone, it ranges from the internationally noted structural failure of Ronan Point, to the internationally premiated design of the new community of Thamesmead.

The worst lesson is economic. British inflation is beginning to show what can happen to the most imaginatively and sensitively designed industrialized building systems when the high costs hit. The prizewinning Thamesmead is being forced to scrap features and variety to meet the tightening cost yardstick—a yardstick that includes no quality or environmental factors or controls. This might be called the inflationary disappearing amenities act.

It can, and will, all happen here. Is anyone looking or listening?

Ada Louise Huxtable is architecture critic of The Times.