

Housing speculations

A small bureaucratic change had huge influence over Britain's postwar cities. In 1948, the London County Council (LCC) transferred responsibility for housing from its surveyors to its architects. Leslie Martin, the architect credited with this change, believed in the power of research – understood in terms of technical investigations and systematic design speculations – to inform housing design. Martin and his colleagues at the LCC, and subsequently at the University of Cambridge, devoted much energy to testing permutations of section and plan form to produce what they imagined to be ideal layouts. The built outcomes of postwar housing research by the LCC, and many contemporaries who followed its lead, were not always successful. But, nevertheless, these investigations – and the postwar spirit of inquiry of which they were a part – showed that architectural research could make a positive contribution to housing design. Indeed, the continuing contributions of architectural thinking to housing research have been numerous: studies of disaster relief housing, for example (as promoted by Architecture for Humanity), or Dutch investigations of housing typologies in the 1990s and 2000s (by the likes of MVRDV, Mecanoo, and Wiel Arets), or the recent Home Improvements project conducted in the UK by the University of Sheffield for the RIBA.

The two articles beginning this issue of **arq** deal with housing research. The first, by Marijn van de Weijer and Koenraad Van Cleempoel (pp. 18–29), reviews the outcomes of a design studio linked to a research project at Hasselt University in Belgium. Students revisited design research methodologies which would not have seemed unfamiliar to Leslie Martin, testing options for flexible housing, the redefinition of under-used spaces and exploring novel typologies. Deniz Balık and Açalya Allmer, meanwhile, reflect on the mountain dwellings project by Bjarke Ingels Group in Ørestad, Copenhagen (pp. 30–40). A typological study, examining how to create cascading units facing sunlight and view, complements a narrative about making an artificial mountain in Denmark's flat landscape. Viewed from the bottom of the cascade, the project is seen as a planted slope while the façade, viewed from other directions, is imprinted with a pixellated pattern of the Himalayas. Whimsy and an eye for branding supplement a typological study which otherwise stands in the lineage of those conducted by the LCC in the 1950s or 1960s.

Out of such typological investigations in architecture, those into housing remain perhaps the most loaded. Issues of dwelling seem more immediate, in everyday terms, than those relating to office or retail spaces, for example. In housing, access to daylight and sunlight, the height of a windowsill, and the nuances of threshold design seem especially important. Maybe more so are issues of atmosphere and character. Research here has the potential to make a huge difference to people's lives. **arq** continues to house speculations which span the interdisciplinary discipline of architecture, and housing remains one of its key ongoing themes.

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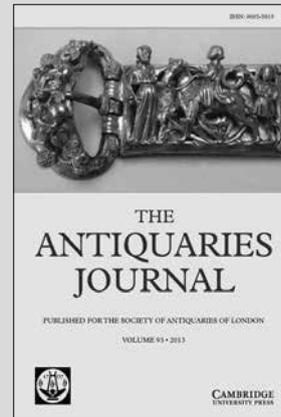
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