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A Coin Has Two Sides:
Architecture as Propaganda, Urban Advocacy, and How to Meaningfully Engage with Community in Space

featuring Hiba Abdallah and Michael Abel

September 19th, 2020 at 3PM

Event Respondent Essay

Response to A Coin with Two Sides: Architecture as Propaganda, Urban Advocacy and How to Meaningfully Engage with Community Space

by **Sara Fruchtman**

On Saturday, September 19, Pumice Raft held a panel discussion on architectural propaganda, public housing, and urban advocacy with artist and organizer Hiba Abdallah and artist, architect, and designer Michael Abel. The conversation went in a number of different directions and there were many different threads to pull on—be it how design discretely manipulates the way we engage with space, colonial statues being torn down around the world, the lack of diversity among recipients of the most prestigious architectural awards, or whether or not communities have a say in the architecture we preserve for history's sake (Hiba's exploration of Guildwood Park interrogated this issue in Scarborough)—but in the end I found myself wondering what we mean when we talk about architectural propaganda, particularly in the context of public housing. I was particularly struck by Michael's statement that "a lot of these questions…[are] out of an architect's control….Architecture does have power and you need to recognize that, but sometimes I think if we really want change we should go into policy or something." The following essay takes Michael's statement as a starting point for considering the relationships between architectural propaganda, public housing and policy. The essay begins with the story of public housing in Vienna and find its way back to Toronto.

On the walls of the oldest *Gemeindebauten* in Vienna—the public housing buildings that today provide homes for almost a third of the city's population—are large inscriptions. Although the wording varies a little from building to building, this description translated from German into English is typical:

**BUILT BY THE
COMMUNITY OF VIENNA
IN THE YEARS OF 1923-1934
BY MEANS OF THE HOUSE BUILDING TAX**

The 220,000 apartment units contained within the *Gemeindebauten* currently make up almost 25 percent of the housing of Vienna. Approximately 65,000 of these apartments were built by the Soziadelmorkratishe Arbeiterpartei (SDAP) between 1923 and 1934. The SDAP, also known as the Automarxists, came to power in 1919 as a result of the first free and universal elections held in Austria. The SDAP held a solid ruling majority on the city council until its defeat by the fascists in 1934.

The public housing built by the SDAP during the fifteen years of "Red Vienna" came to represent the entire project of Automarxist socialism. Although Engels had described the solution to "the housing question" fifty years prior as being beyond housing—for Engels the only solution was "the abolition of the capitalist mode of production"—the Automarxists, believed that strategic reforms, like housing, could positively change social dynamics.

Writing about the invisibility of the proletariat in Red Vienna, John F. Hartle describes the SDAP's political project as a "propaganda of construction," in which the newly erected buildings advertised their ideological program, while also addressing the immediate social needs of their constituents. According to Hartle, by building housing for working class people, the SDAP could ultimately change social conditions and help to prepare for a socialist future.

While the inscriptions on the Red Vienna buildings may seem too matter-of-fact to be considered propaganda, they still point to a different kind of politics and a different financial system of housing, one developed in opposition to private landlords. These houses are built, owned and lived in by the *community*.

The social housing of Red Vienna marks a particularly unique moment in the history of public housing—a moment in which government owned and operated housing projects were considered an integral part of a larger socialist project. Although most of the public housing that became widespread globally after the Second World War were not explicitly socialist like the *Gemeindebauten* of Red Vienna, there were nevertheless inspired by political optimism and the belief that architects, urban planners and policymakers could not only design housing for the poor, they could eradicate poverty itself.

In Toronto, some of the largest and most famous, sometimes infamous, public housing projects were built in the 1960s in an effort to address poverty, and what politicians identified as “slum districts” in the city. Proponents of modern architecture believed that they could not only replace slums with beautiful buildings—and therefore increase property values in urban centres—they could actually change the lives of the Toronto’s poor.

But this optimistic, perhaps narcissistic view of architecture’s power soon came undone as public housing projects in Toronto and throughout the world grew rife with crime during the early 1970s. These buildings were tarnished by vandalism, broken windows and disrepair. What’s worse, public housing project turned out to be the embodiment of residential segregation, particularly in the U.S., but also in Canada. By the late 1970s, public housing projects became synonymous with urban decline as crime rates rose and cities saw the massive shift of a predominantly white middle-class population towards the suburbs.

Perhaps the turning point in the public housing crisis occurred shortly after 3 p.m. on March 16, 1972: the first implosion of the demolition of the 33 tower Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in downtown St. Louis. (The iconic image of the demolished building was featured in the cult film Koyaanisqatsi, with Philip Glass’s score crooning in the background). Five years later, Charles Jencks announced that the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe represented the “death of modern architecture”—an interpretation of the project that has become virtually unanimous. Those familiar with the history of architecture cite Pruitt-Igoe as evidence of the failure of high modernism, and the inability of architects to provide sustainable housing for the poor.

However, the idea that architectural design was responsible for the demise of Pruitt-Igoe shifts attention away from the root causes of Pruitt-Igoe’s problems by assuming that poverty and related social problems are caused by the design and nature of the buildings themselves and thus can be solved by architects.

This is not to say that architects are devoid of all responsibility. Public housing designs of the 1960s favoured high-rise buildings overlooking meandering car-free paths, intended to provide recreational space for residents and their children. However, several studies concluded that these design ideas effectively turned the projects in on themselves, separating residents from outside neighbourhoods. By doing so the design inhibited the kind of safety measures naturally produced by the intrinsic neighbourhood watch that characterizes busy urban centres. Not surprisingly, the current revitalization projects in Regent Park, Alexandra Park and Lawrence Heights all aim to remedy this design problem by reconnecting these once insular neighbourhoods to adjacent communities. But can a handful of new roads and storefronts really solve an entire community’s safety problems? Of course not. Policymakers will still need to tackle myriad complex systemic issues: poverty, lack of sustainable government support and community programs, racism, and policing.

This complex history highlights the problem with architectural propaganda—both that which champions architecture as a means to change society and that which equates it with our worst paternalistic impulses. Architecture’s power, however deployed, cannot be disassociated from real power and real politics and public policies. Pruitt-Igoe failed because too many middle-class white people moved out of St. Louis towards the suburbs and the city experienced an unprecedented vacancy crisis; it didn’t have enough tax dollars to put towards building repairs and maintenance; the government ultimately didn’t commit to ongoing financial support of the project; and, as Richard Rothstein describes in his compelling book, *The Colour of Law*, the residential segregation that characterized Pruitt-Igoe and many public housing projects in American cities was not *de facto*, it was *de jure*—that is, it was designed and enforced by governmental policies.

The architects behind the Pruitt-Igoe project had thought that all they needed to do was build the building. Maybe this was Engels warning: “It is not that the solution of the housing question simultaneously solves the social question, but that only the solution of the social question… is the solution of the housing question made possible.”

Although the public housing projects built in Toronto in the postwar years continue to operate today, these projects face many of the same issues that brought about Pruitt-Igoe’s demise. In the 1990s, after the public housing portfolio was downloaded from the federal government to the provinces, and then from the provinces to municipalities, there just weren’t enough dollars to support the ongoing maintenance and expansion of public housing, let alone the political will to find it. Even in Vienna, the political ambition that led to the *Gemeindebauten* eventually dried up and the last new building was completed over a decade ago. By 2004, Vienna officially decided it would no longer continue building socially-owned housing, and today the city struggles with many of the same housing issues we are currently experiencing in North America.

In Toronto, the lack of government support for social housing has led Toronto Community Housing Corporation to seek out private support. TCHC’s widely criticized revitalization projects have had to rely on public-private partnerships just to raise enough money for repairs to existing public housing buildings. And anyone who lives in one of these projects will tell you that TCHC could not continue to operate these buildings in such a state of disrepair.

In a recent Facebook post advertising the market rental projects that are being built as part of the Alexandra Park revitalization—a post which unsurprisingly received a slew of negative comments—one tenant explained that it was the tenants themselves that petitioned TCHC to undergo a public-private partnership for revitalization because the disrepair had made many, if not all, of units unliveable. One tenant, the post described, still has burns on his legs from a fire caused by poor repairs and a leak in the roof.

The Alexandra Park tenants have been integral to TCHC’s plans for the revitalization of their community. Tenants attend monthly meetings and have had invaluable input and approval of all of the elements of the new design. More importantly, based on the experiences of tenants in Regent Park, many of whom were displaced from their community to accommodate the revitalization, the Alexandra Park tenants have ensured a zero-displacement policy, which means that no tenant will have to leave their neighbourhood to accommodate revitalization.

Despite the importance of this project to the Alexandra Park tenants, it’s hard not to think about the 110,000 households that were on the waitlist for public housing in 2019. The lack of government investment in public housing has become particularly troubling in light of COVID-19, when many people have found themselves living in parks due to lack of adequate, available and safe shelter options. The encampments, with the support of grassroots organizations like the Encampment Support Network among others, consistently advocate for affordable housing options, but the city has yet to answer their call.

Engels may have been right. The housing question cannot be solved by simply building buildings. But it would certainly be a start.

About Pumice Raft:

a pumice raft is an ecological phenomenon that usually follows an underwater volcanic eruption. Amongst the lava, plumes of pumice stones slowly float to the surface of the ocean. If the wind is calm the individual stones form what some sailors have reported as floating islands that appear out of nowhere. The pumice raft has even been known to ferry flora and fauna to new shores. More than an illusion on the horizon, a pumice raft represents a vessel, a conduit, a vehicle; its very constitution cultivates an environment where things can come together in the spirit of collaboration.

Pumice Raft is also an alter ego, a lecture series, a tool, but most recently a non-profit space in Tkaronto ON, Canada that advocates for an ecological approach to the display of visual art and the facilitation of related education. The physical space of Pumice Raft currently resides on the land of the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat, and the Anishinabewaki ᐊᓂᔑᓇᐯᒧᐊᕈ .

About the writer:

Sara Fruchtman is a Toronto-based writer and researcher. She spent several years working in the arts, including two years as the research assistant in the Department of Photography at the Art Gallery of Ontario, before moving on to work in the non-profit sector, supporting organizations working on criminal justice issues. She recently completed a master's in Criminology and Sociolegal Studies where she specialized in legal history, poverty and the law. She enjoys researching and writing on architectural and urban history, photography, legal history, and contemporary criminal justice issues.