

SOCIAL HOUSING AS A SOLUTION TO THE ECOLOGICAL IMPASSE, FRANCE

I have already thought, and on a number of occasions, to support the construction of social housing on this blog. But beyond the preconceptions, very often caricature-esque, which would render a left-wing activist as a “public” and collective housing partisan because he is “social” by nature, while a right-wing activist would be defending the rise of individual property, we have other good reasons to support the construction of social housing: reasons of an ecological scope.



Now that it has been admitted by all specialist observers, institutional or organizational (notably the Abbe Pierre Foundation) that the social situation of individuals with respect to housing has been deteriorating for a decade, nothing has really been done by the right-wing governments or the Solferiniens (the “mobilization” of public property is nothing of a pro-active policy) in order to stem this spiral. I am talking about a spiral because the difficulties of access to housing give rise to difficulties in finding stable employment, and vice versa. The primary ecological implication of constructing social housing is first of all on a human level: Social housing today allows 11 million French people to have a roof over their heads in order to live and thrive, regardless of income level or professional occupation.

In addition, construction activity (as well as rehabilitation) contributes just as much to the creation of local activity and jobs that cannot be moved elsewhere. The Social Union for Housing (USH), the representative arm the HLM [Habitation A Loyer Modere] umbrella organization, clocks in at fourteen billion euros, creating jobs related to the construction or rehabilitation of social housing each year. Social housing is an important growth and employment mechanism with a socially useful basis, which allows for improving the well-being of the population. Besides, setting rental prices at relatively low levels allows for increasing the purchasing power and standard of living of the most modest [incomes].

Dependent on public governance and regulations to ban profiting from construction operations (the opposite of private developers, for whom that is the primary function), it's the general interest that motivates the construction of HML housing in places where there's a clear need or where a mixed-income society becomes an imperative. It is a tool for organizing "living together" and implementing social connectivity. Utilized well, social housing becomes a political and democratic means of management. Key to the ranks of social housing landlords, men and women are often engaged in maintaining good building and site conditions, but equally in animating local life, and they do an excellent job to this effect. Building family gardens next to the buildings is an example of concrete steps that landlords take.

Because it is in pursuit of the general interest, social housing is also the best, even in the area of housing, at organizing ecological planning. The nonprofit nature of its activity allows for the implementation of initiatives that do not bring in money in the short term, but that are socially and environmentally beneficial in the long term. Such is the case, for example, with rehabilitated housing operations, which respect strict environmental and energy standards, and allow for the fight against precariousness and favor the improvement of health conditions. These actions become even more necessary because many buildings – dozens of years after their construction – prove themselves to be real energy hogs.



Yet again, by drastically limiting the competences of public intervention, of the state as local collectives, the austerity policies the government of President Hollande has adopted throws a wrench in the gears of the construction of social housing. Faced with this rarification of resources, landlords are forced to limit their projects and prioritize the most “rentable” deals, meaning the least risky for the investor, who will mobilize his own funds. In addition, the continual lowering of payment rates to Livret A (whose primary and founding mission is to finance social housing) contributes to this drop in activity. Austerity harms the general interest, contributes to preventing citizens from living decently, and prevents any ecological transition.

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