Tower and Slab
Histories of global mass housing

Florian Urban
Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Preface by Mark Jarzombek xi

Introduction 1
Mass housing—between glory and shame 1
Continuous principles: paternalism and standardization 2
Seven historical narratives 4

Chapter 1: Social Reform, State Control, and the Origins of Mass Housing 7
Housing and the social question 7
The origins of industrialized construction 8
The modernist movement in the interwar period: the first mass housing developments in Germany, France, and England 10
The post-war era: mass housing goes global 13

Chapter 2: Mass Housing in Chicago 19
Anti-high-rise America 19
Tower blocks in the Black Belt 22
Equal dwelling conditions in a market economy 24
“Brutal buildings” 28
New York exceptionalism 31
Replacing towers with pitched-roof houses 32
Exorcising the spirits of the past 35

Chapter 3: The Concrete Cordon Around Paris 37
Victims of modernism? 37
Charity and control 41
Building a concrete cordon 44
Sarcelles: the mass housing disease 49
Improving the grands ensembles? 51
Cité de la Muette: mass housing and mass murder 53
Mass housing and the geography of exclusion 55

Chapter 4: Slabs versus Tenements in East and West Berlin 59
Battles over buildings 59
Organic concrete blocks 60
Fall from public grace 64
The "murdered city" 65
Blurred party lines 66
The "slab" in East Berlin 68
Demonic tower blocks, homely late-nineteenth-century tenements 72
Reconfiguring old and new 73
Ghettos for immigrants? 75
The calm after the storm 76

Chapter 5: Brasília, the Slab Block Capital 79
Order and progress: a new metropolis as a condenser for modernization 79
The superquadra 81
Egalitarian dreams in a polarized country 86
"City of Hope" and modernist dystopia 88
The "tower in the jungle" 91
Pilot plan versus satellite cities? 92
An architectural comeback? 98

Chapter 6: Mumbai—Mass Housing for the Upper Crust 101
The tower and the slum 101
A metropolis on seven islands 105
Colonial precedents: the chawl and the apartment block 106
From independence to neoliberalism: housing in a mixed economy 108
1993–present: the state as facilitator of housing 112
"High-rise slums for the rich": the Back Bay land reclamation 117
Why is there no prefabrication in India? 119
Alternative approaches: sites and services 121
Standardized upscale dwellings 123

Chapter 7: Prefab Moscow 127
The industrialization of the Soviet construction industry 127
Oxygen for the housing market 134
Stratifications of a socialist metropolis 135
Chapter 8: High-Rise Shanghai 145
The Shanghai skyline 145
The 1950s: standard design, individual construction 148
Modernist "new villages" 149
Prefab experiments 153
Structural reform: privatization and polarization 154
High-rise apartments for the privileged and for the masses 158
Tower block compounds versus historic alleys? 160
Shanghai: future capital of tower block housing? 165

Chapter 9: Global Architecture, Locally Conditioned 169
Adapting the mass housing block to local conditions 169
Ambiguous effects, contextual perception 172
Flexible meaning, inflexible architecture 174

Interview Partners 177
Notes 179
Index 286