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“Mass” Housing in the Social and the Post-Social Worlds:

Reading Hannah Arendt’s “Mass Society”

ABSTRACT

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt predicated her thesis on societal introspection on what she called “mass society” - a population which had rapidly grown, urbanised and atomised, bringing new imperatives for humans to live together in vast numbers and with closer proximities. Throughout, Arendt discusses how shifting boundaries of public and private define our cities and our lives. As her mass society of three billion now approaches eight billion, how has the relationship between public and private - city and household - played out in the staggering population growth of the sixty years since her book? This paper will explore how these six decades since the publication of *The Human Condition* have seen fundamental transformations in the way we understand what we now call housing, its relationship with the city, and its relationship with collective life.

Keywords: Arendt, housing, population growth, mass society, Unité d’Habitation, Barbican.

Introduction

What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together.¹

Writing in 1958, Hannah Arendt argued that the discrete, yet symbiotic, realms of public and private that defined the Greek city-state had been lost in the modern age. The Athenian free public realm (polis), required for its very existence the support of the oppositional private realm of the household (oikos), which itself required private management (oikonomia). The separate realms had entirely different rules, yet were ontologically connected through the operation of the city-state. “The rise of the city-state meant that man received ‘besides his private life a sort of second life, his bios politikos. Now every citizen belongs to two orders of existence; and there is a sharp

distinction in his life between what is his own (idiom) and what is communal (koinon).”²

By the modern age, these two “orders of existence” had collapsed into each other, producing the modern idea of “society” - a single “gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping” with one single set of rules.³ Public life now resided in the domain of the household, whose private realm had become a collective concern inseparable from the public. Arendt wrote: “[T]he two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself.”⁴

The emergence of society – the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organizational devices – from the shadowy interior of the household, into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen.⁵

The continual dialectic of individual and collective that runs through *The Human Condition* is predicated on experience of a world that had rapidly grown and urbanised through capitalism. Capitalism promoted and prioritised the private pursuit of economic interests, bringing with it what Max Weber (whose thinking Arendt invokes throughout) had already demonstrated: “an activity whose deepest motivation . . . is worry and care about the self.”⁶

That Arendt uses the term “mass society” to indicate a loss of collectivity, at first seems contradictory. Is Arendt presenting an understanding of “mass” as an agglomerate – a mass acquiescence in the formation of society - or is there a simple numeric inference in the use of the term? The former is commonly accepted, building on Arendt’s prolific use of the word “masses” in her earlier book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), where, as Peter Baehr points out in his essay “The ‘Masses’ in Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Totalitarianism,” “[m]asses’ is simply not a concept designed to handle plural strata.”⁷

The idea of mass as a concept associated with the singular, however, does not negate completely its reliance on numbers. Arendt pointedly inserts the clause “or at least not primarily” into her sharpest statement on mass society, which opens

this paper. She reveals that, while the quantitative may not be the primary problem, it is still a problem. She makes this numeric point most assertively where she discusses “conformism”, a condition she sees as “inherent in [mass] society”.⁸ We are reminded that the Greek city-state, “. . . the most individualistic and least conformable body politic known to us . . .”, could only achieve freedom in the polis by restricting its numbers.⁹ Large numbers of people, on the other hand, “develop an almost irresistible inclination toward despotism . . .”¹⁰

I would argue that Arendt sees “mass society” as a bipartite concept, related to the passivity and conformism brought about by capitalism, but also one that is amplified by a continual multiplication of population:

. . . it is obvious that every increase in population means an increased validity and a marked decrease of “deviation”. Politically, this means that the larger the population in any given body politic, the more likely it will be the social rather than the political that constitutes the public realm.¹¹

Through the social era, we have continually been required to live in ever closer proximity. With this, one might have expected a new human condition to involve an intensification of the public, built on a new necessity for co-operation. However, Arendt makes the contrary case. Modernity yields precisely the opposite human condition – “introspection”. In making this conclusion, within the shifting public to private boundaries in the trajectory toward modernity, Arendt organises and articulates her well known triad of human activity, using the referent of the Greek city-state. The rise of mass society had folded polis into household, through growing the importance of the activity she calls “Labor” - the private activities associated with “the necessities of life”, and the shrinkage of what she calls “Action” - the public activities, including communication, collaboration and negotiation, which take place when we “appear” together in public. “The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action . . .”¹² Distinct from, yet overlapping, both is the third activity, “Work”, which “. . . fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice”.¹³ Work’s fabrication is associated with durability, as opposed to the process and consumption-orientated realm of Labor, or the political realm of Action.

Recent architectural readings of Arendt have tended to either theorise a reclamation of architecture's significance through its re-location in Arendt's realm of Work, or to use Arendt to contextualise possible new politico-philosophical registers of human collectivity, theorised through Action.¹⁴ My interest in *The Human Condition* lies principally in the relationship between the domiciliary and the quantitative – in how the continual expansion of Arendt's "societal household" might affect forms of public that lie latent within it. In it I seek not the validation of any permanence or re-forged historical significance for architecture, but an adjusted understanding of housing as not only part of the "human artifice", but as something indexed to the life process itself, which in the sixty years since *The Human Condition* has brought about unrelenting necessity for increased provision. In the social age, without the delimited population of the Greek city-states, it was inevitable that housing would shift toward "Labor" and its processes. After all, it needed to continually grow. My questions coalesce around failings to bring about adequate housing for all of our population, how these failings might be addressed, and what a new "household" might look like when materialised into form.

As Arendt's mass society of three billion people now approaches eight billion, how has her thinking on the relationship between household and city played out in the sixty years since her book was written? I will chronicle the six decades since 1958, highlighting two European exemplars of housing that I will argue are *a-priori* protagonists of the social age, before looking at reasons why such manifestations have gradually been rendered impossible in a post-social age. Some of my empirical data is gathered from my own 2008 practice-based consumer and market research into the deficiencies of the UK's volume house-building industry. The globalised world will ensure, axiomatically, that these findings from the UK are unlikely to be isolated.

1958 - World population 3 billion. The Rise of the Social.

Etymologically, to be private means to be deprived, bereaved even. To Arendt, "not appearing" in public means being deprived of a proper human life - what she calls the "privation of privacy".

The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others; as far as they are concerned, private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist.¹⁵

Arendt sees this privation as beginning first with Christianity - the transference of politics to religion - and ending with the inheritance of that “deprived” Christian idea of public by a secular modern mass society. The notion of individual immortality, she says, “reversed the ancient relationship between man and the world and promoted the most mortal thing, human life, to the position of immortality, which up to then the cosmos had held.”¹⁶ As Samuel Moyn points out in his paper “Hannah Arendt on the Secular”, Arendt is renowned for arguing in *The Human Condition* that: “the victory of the Christian faith in the ancient world . . . could not but be disastrous for the esteem and the dignity of politics.”¹⁷

The public - and with it notions of collectivity - was replaced by religion in the post-classical age. Moyn observes that “Far from simply extinguishing Roman politics, she [Arendt] argues, ‘Rome’s political and spiritual heritage passed to the Christian Church.’ ”¹⁸ By the secular modern age, one of mass society’s failings was that religion was not replaced by some other idea of public formation.

Arendt thought that what was at stake in modernity was leaving religion behind, at least as the foundation of public coexistence. Conversely, modernity took its most politically defective forms when (among other things) it had failed to make its necessary break with the religious civilization that preceded it.¹⁹

In architecture, for fifty years Le Corbusier had tirelessly been seeking the sustenance of the new, attempting to address questions of the shape mass society might take. Six years before *The Human Condition*, in the Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles, he raised an unprecedented experiment in “mass” housing, constructed by the state with public money, and conceived as a city within an eighteen storey concrete frame. The project was brought into being by the communist mayor of Marseilles, Jean Cristofel, and the Minister of Reconstruction and Urban Planning, Raoul Dautry. The entire structure was organised around the residential cell – a module of 3.66 metres width which configured into twenty three different apartment types. Three hundred and twenty one apartments and sixteen guest rooms for a population of sixteen hundred people were accessed by seven interior streets. Public spaces, including a roof garden, solarium, children’s pool, a three hundred metre athletics track, a health centre, gymnasium, nursery, kindergarten, pharmacy, restaurant, bakery, supermarket, smaller shops, offices, laundry and cleaning services, all occupied residual spaces within the residential matrix.

Here was an architectural progenitor for the literal folding of public into private. Le Corbusier’s preoccupation with the house - to make it the centre of everything -

resonates with the Arendtian idea of the household consuming the public. It is no accident that in his writings and correspondences about this building, Le Corbusier refers to it interchangeably as “cité verticale” and “la maison.”²⁰ The city as one gigantic super-household, instantiated in concrete.

At the handing over ceremony of the Unité, Le Corbusier said:

The inhabitants of the Marseilles-Unité, left to themselves . . . have not been slow to form an association to defend their interests. The objects of the association are . . . the organization of collective activities . . . ; the participation of the inhabitants of the Unité in the determination of the material and moral administration of the Unité and its dependencies in an atmosphere of mutual understanding with all people who may be directly or indirectly interested.²¹

In this “house”, it was clear he saw new opportunities for the public to reside.

Shortly before his death Le Corbusier reflected: “I have for fifty years been studying the chap known as ‘Man’ and his wife and kids. I have been inspired by one single preoccupation: to introduce into the home the sense of the sacred; to make the home the temple of the family.”²² Perhaps in these religious references to the house, Le Corbusier interfaces with Arendt’s perspective on the political deficiencies in modernity’s failure to reclaim the collective from religion. The Unité presented a modern, secular, “social” human condition - a household that multiplied to make a new order of liturgical collective for mass society. It celebrated a new body politic, built on the multiplication of the omnipresent cell of the house. A reverse polis.

1968 - World population 3.75 billion. The Quantitative Social.

1968 was the year housing provision in the UK reached its peak of over three hundred and fifty thousand units, a figure that, despite demand continually increasing, has spectacularly fallen ever since.²³ In the UK, “council houses” were constructed and owned by the “family” of the state. Around fifty percent of the UK’s population lived in them. Today the figure is around eight percent.

In the rise of society and the shift of human life toward the private, it is logical that housing would become an affair of the super-human family, which determinately domesticated the public. Le Corbusier understood the need for a new spatial model to recognise this relationship and to define a new formation of public life within it. Yet

within the housing frenzy of this decade, the “necessity” for provision very quickly streamlined, outsourcing the construction of houses to the market, leaving little space for discourse on new forms of social organisation. Around this time, Manfredo Tafuri made his vociferous critique of modern architecture’s collusion with capitalism, stating that its relationship with the methods and objectives of the market eliminated any socially transformative potentials it might hold. Modern architecture, Tafuri said, was now “ready to fully integrate design, at all levels, with the reorganization of production, distribution, and consumption in the new capitalist city.”²⁴ He predicted a future for architects in which they had to react against the “extreme consequences of the processes they helped set in motion.”²⁵ The “consequences” of providing a framework for housing mass society that could so easily be transformed into a simple tool for replication is consistent with Arendt’s view of activity within the realm of Labor. Society had attached the production of housing to Labor, and its production became “enslaved by necessity.”²⁶

Only the “mass” of the Unité (its quantitative imperative) had been maintained. If Le Corbusier in 1952 had tried to find and celebrate a new body-politic, by the end of his life he acknowledged, with embitterment, that “the dwelling [now] had no chance to become the temple of the family: Rental boxes were made.”²⁷

1978 - World population 4.5 billion. A New Form of Social.

In 1978 Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter published *Collage City*. Borrowing from Lévi-Strauss’ anthropological theories, Rowe and Koetter denounced urban practices of “total-design.” The quantitative imperative of the previous decade had fuelled suspicion of modernist mass housing, and Rowe and Koetter, lamenting eclecticism, argued that cities should embrace “bricolage” instead of endorsing widespread renewal. They imagined such bricolage as consisting of fragments of the past, present, and future. In *Collage City*, Rowe and Koetter put forward a critique of the Unité, through making a comparison with the sixteenth-century Uffizi complex in Florence, whose central void space is almost proportionally identical to the Marseilles block. They abstracted both buildings into a representation of figure and ground - Unite as a figure, Uffizi as ground. They said: “. . . while the effect of Marseilles is to endorse a private and atomized society, the Uffizi is much more completely a ‘collective’ structure.”²⁸

Rowe and Koetter's argument is relevant here in that it uses Arendtian themes in its analysis. Yet, while the binary logics in the argument support the possibility of two discrete realms, the realms are simply attributed to categories of building and residual space, denying the Unité its true position as a complex new combination of public and private within the bigger construct of a modern "societal household." The Unité of course endorses "society", but I argue that the artificial grounds within the body of the Unité form a new type of "social" landscape, beyond Rowe and Koetter's conventional registers of figure and ground or private and public.

However, the definition of any "real" ground in our cities did not become moot because of the Unité, but because, as Arendt reminds us in her prologue: "Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever."²⁹ From nineteenth-century bridge infrastructures and ground consolidations, to twentieth-century inhabited urban podiums, since the early industrial age our technological preoccupations have been less about developing our human means of inhabiting the earth's surface, and more about escaping it. Politically, Arendt considers this escape as beginning "centuries before the industrial revolution", with the formation of a new expropriated labouring class.³⁰ For this class, the nation-state gradually replaced the household - as a substitute for private property - before the nation-state itself began to erode in the twentieth century. Although beginning with capitalism, Arendt considers this continual "worldly expropriation" as being supported by modern registers of both left and right. While capitalism promoted the private pursuit of economic interests, and inevitably involved the expropriation of a specific class, alternative ideologies reclaimed collective identification through the nation-state and "offered all classes a substitute for the privately owned home of which the class of the poor had been deprived."³¹ While this "undoubtedly mitigated cruelty and misery", to Arendt, it did not manage to much reduce "the process of expropriation and world alienation, since collective ownership, strictly speaking, is a contradiction in terms."³²

The rise of society brought about the simultaneous decline of the public as well as the private realm. But the eclipse of the common public world, so crucial to the formation of the lonely mass man and so dangerous in the formation of the worldless mentality of modern ideological mass movements, began with the much more tangible loss of a privately owned share in the world.³³

In the same year as *Collage City* was published, I discovered for the first time the almost completed Barbican complex in London. The Barbican is a hybrid public arts-orientated “artificial” podium, with three forty-storey residential towers and a series of seven-storey residential slab blocks reminiscent of Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse. It felt like the architecture of the Barbican stood in opposition to Arendt’s view of the correlation between “society” and “worldlessness”. Brought about through Keynesian principles of fiscal spending, the Barbican’s identification was not with left or right, nor particularly with a national programme. It took almost twenty years to build, bridging five changes in UK administration and seven different Prime Ministers. Design started in 1955 and, anachronistically, construction was not fully completed until 1982, under Margaret Thatcher’s monetarist administration. With a residential population of over six thousand in its fourteen hectare site, the Barbican achieved a population density three times that of most of central London. Its “necessity” was not just for housing provision, however, but for orchestrating the collectivity of different sub-societal households, reliant on local government for the household rules. It contained more than twenty different public programmes, two large residential squares and had a car free site. Publically funded and council-built, the Barbican was designed for the middle-class as a drive to increase the residential population of the inner city in a time of urban retrenchment. Homes were rented from, and the entire complex was managed by, the Corporation of London.

The Barbican had perhaps found a new way of folding together public and private - of making the household, which was still a collective (albeit bureaucratic) entity, pluralistic. It was designed and constructed by a single firm of architects, Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, who controlled everything, from the disposition of its complex programme, to the nuances of its highly bespoke tectonic details, materials, fixtures and fittings. Aside from the odd piece of preserved history, such as a fragment of London’s Roman wall and the church of St Giles’ Cripplegate, the Barbican is fourteen hectares of all-new, anti-bricolage “total design”. It is not orchestrated into one discrete house as in Le Corbusier’s model, but instead multiplies the Unité’s artificial grounds to host an explosion of programmes within its large, easily discernible “share of the world.”

1988 - World population 5.25 billion. Selling the Social.

By 1988, in the UK, the home was once again an important part of political discourse. Margaret Thatcher’s “right to buy” was in full operation and the electorate had fully endorsed the ideological imperative of private home ownership, which it

was believed would build a stable society.³⁴ State provision of anything was rapidly becoming considered, with some disdain, as a last resort for what the market could not provide. By 1988, more than a million council homes transferred to the market, with policies in place to prevent councils using the capital receipts to replace them. Here, one might appropriate Arendt's words on ownership:

What prevented the polis from violating the private lives of its citizens and made it hold sacred the boundaries surrounding each property was not respect for private property as we understand it, but the fact that without owning a house a man could not participate in the affairs of the world because he had no location in it which was properly his own.³⁵

While the cursory idea of the importance of ownership might seem to resonate with the Thatcherite idea of non-statism, the classical ownership Arendt outlined was a wholly different form of private. The strength of the private was its support of the public. In this decade, the private was being prioritised at the expense of the public. Margaret Thatcher famously said "who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families."³⁶ This ideological position, which prioritised the individual over the collective, shifted the boundaries again, retracting the giant societal household, and beginning a process of atomisation of society into individuals with a deep suspicion of anything public.

1998 - World population 6 billion. The Death of the Social.

In 1998, the publication of the book *The Third Way, the Renewal of Social Democracy* by Anthony Giddens effectively brought an end to traditional statist programmes, and with it any idea of a recovery of state provision of housing.³⁷ This became part of a general pattern of "markets not politics" that rapidly spread around the world from that moment on. It could be argued that it started in 1992, when Alan Greenspan, chairman of the US Federal Reserve, met President-elect Bill Clinton, telling him the economic realities of the now neoliberalising world – social reform was impossible without involving markets in programmes traditionally associated with public spending.³⁸ This hegemony of markets would be adopted wholesale by governments everywhere, including the New Labour project in Britain, which won its landslide victory in the 1997 election.

In a world population of now six billion, the importance of private housing markets to wider economies meant a new kind of “folding together” was happening - private accumulation of housing stock was entirely conflating home and asset in a society of ever-rising demand for houses, ever-diminishing availability of land, and increasing appetite for opportunistic sub-prime lending by financial institutions. By now, in the UK, around one and a half million of its six and a half million council houses had been sold, but what was becoming obvious was that the market (and an under-performing housebuilding industry) was not causing only social inequality, but also macroeconomic instability. A national asset structure in which the housing market was playing a central macroeconomic role began to adopt performance imperatives which served to escalate continual under-supply, bringing about what was commonly recognised as a deepening societal crisis.

The total number of UK housing completions in 1998 was around one hundred and fifty thousand. Quantitative provision, which had been the “necessity” in 1968, had plummeted. By the turn of the millennium, the UK government, facing a housing crisis, set in motion a major review of the housing industry. Headed by economist Kate Barker, the review warned of “increasing problems of homelessness, affordability and social division, decline in standards of public service delivery and increasing the costs of doing business in the UK – hampering our economic success.”³⁹ In Barker’s subsequent book, *Housing : Where’s the Plan*, the inability to provide housing is cited as “the UK’s biggest policy failure.” She talks of the resulting “indefensible economic distortions” which lead to social failure: “it thwarts family formation, the foundation of a fulfilled and purposive life.”⁴⁰ If the ongoing sale of council houses was killing the “social”, the market’s inability to step-up was now in danger of bringing down capitalism with it.

2008 - World population 7 billion. The Plutocratic Ground.

The collapse of the fourth-biggest investment bank in the United States, Lehman Brothers, largely due to its involvement in sub-prime mortgage provision, signalled the global financial crisis of 2008. Inevitably, the rampant demand for housing from a “mass society” of now seven billion, encouraged by overzealous mortgage provision and economic growth built on the debt, had produced a housing bubble of unprecedented scale. The rapid mean reversion meant that in the USA alone there were more than three million foreclosure filings issued during the year of 2008.⁴¹ An estimated ten million people lost their homes in the six years around the crash. The

ground is the obvious commodity in this economic complexion. It is a finite quantity, with a growing population continuing to increase demand on it. Accordingly, it is inescapable that land price will rise, and with it, house prices. On such a plutocratic ground, if Thomas Piketty in his economic tomb *Capital*, is correct, with the rise of house prices and the ensuing investment frenzy, wealth inequality will continue to grow – and with wealth inequality, escalation of our already deep crisis of housing provision will follow.⁴²

My own UK housing research in this year revealed that the market was dramatically under-supplied, the existing product was over-priced, technologically Luddite and of very poor quality. Above all, consumer satisfaction was extremely low. Products in every other sector, it seemed, had developed to take advantage of technological advancements, to reflect changing lifestyles, and, as brands, were used by consumers to communicate values and attitudes. Housing had failed to adapt in this way. In the housing sector, the UK Government's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) carried out a series of audits between 2004 and 2011 to assess the quality of market housing in England. Matthew Carmona, Professor of Planning and Urban Design at the Bartlett School of Planning, UCL, sums up the audits, quoting a CABE director as saying:

“ . . . the quality of housing in this country was shocking” (quoted in Design Governance, The CABE Experiment). Their final audit suggested that fewer than 18% of schemes could be classed as good or very good design, and 29% were so poor that they should not have received planning permission.⁴³

The total number of UK housing completions in 2008 was around one hundred and sixty thousand - less than half the figure in 1968. The absence of a quantitative necessity now seemed to have joined the absence of the qualitative. The market had proved that its failure was greater than that of the post-war quantitative years. It could provide neither quantity nor quality.

2018 - World population 7.6 billion. Visiting Rights.

In 2018, Stockholm refused permission for the construction of Apple's Foster and Partners designed Apple Store in its Kungsträdgården Park, one of the most historically significant parks in the city. *The Guardian* newspaper, in an article about the refusal, describes it as “one of the city's oldest parks, the venue for public events

from Pride parades to election debates, political protests to winter ice-skating.”⁴⁴ The article continues, quoting Angela Ahrendts, Apple’s senior vice-president of retail, as saying “It’s funny, we actually don’t call them stores anymore . . . [w]e call them town squares, because they’re gathering places where everyone is welcome.”⁴⁵

Here, the use of the domiciliary term “welcome” is indicative of a deepening of the domestication of the public realm. It invokes the thoughts of another philosopher of the city, Henri Lefebvre. In his *Le Droit à la Ville* (1968), Lefebvre had argued that the capitalist metropolis, and its commodification of urban life, was bringing about an escalation of social inequality and a depletion of social interaction. Lefebvre proposed his “right to the city”, calling for urban space to be “a meeting point for building collective life.”⁴⁶

The right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life.⁴⁷

In Apple’s welcoming of everyone to the new form of town square, perhaps the “right to the city” has become a “simple visiting right.”

Privately owned public spaces are of course now part of the urban landscape everywhere. In the UK, for example, in collaboration with Greenspace Information for Greater London, London’s environmental records centre, the Guardian newspaper ran a series of investigative articles exposing what it called “pseudo-public space”. It identified approximately fifty sites in London (including parts of the new £3 billion sixty-seven acre King’s Cross redevelopment) that meet its criteria of “outdoor, open and publicly accessible locations that are owned and maintained by private developers or other private companies.”⁴⁸

Conclusion

If in the early modern age, polis had collapsed into society, transitioning from a free public realm to a gigantic bureaucratic household, then the 2018 “polis as Apple store” and the urban model of privately owned public space perhaps suggest that entire household is now up for sale. Neoliberal practices have ensured that architecture’s role in the city has capitulated since the days of the Barbican. As Douglas Spencer notes in his book *The Architecture of Neoliberalism*: “Architecture

has travelled some distance since the 1970s, to accommodate itself to the present-day pragmatics of doing business.”⁴⁹ The exponential growth of mass society through capitalism increasingly tested the relationship between the household and the city. From her referent of classical Greece, Arendt referred to “the rise of the social”⁵⁰ - the modern age within which she was writing, where “the facsimile of one super-human family”⁵¹ had folded public and private together into the single realm called “society”. In sixty years, this has given way to a completely new condition - where not only has the boundary between public and private contracted, but where we have also accepted the gradual abandonment of any notion of a re-orchestrated collective within the social. “Households” have atomised into individuals. In Britain alone, half of all publically owned land has been sold and around two million council homes have been sold to individuals at discount prices or have been destroyed and their land sold off.⁵² The privately owned public space of recent years now brings about a new complexion - the ownership and management of households by corporations. The corporation is of course also an individual entity.

In the Athenian polis, if “public” was formed between the households of free citizens, modern-age examples such as the Unité and the Barbican formed publics in a different way - orchestrating space for sub-societal publics within their super-scale households, be these households self-managed by families or managed by the super-human family of the state. In the Unité, we find a materialisation of “society” within the multiple artificial grounds of a super-household, whose ambition is to form a new order of liturgical collective, built on a celebration of the dwelling. In the Barbican, the grounds multiply to form a landscape of multifarious activities in an intense super-enclave of city life. In both we find a challenge to the presumption that ground is always on the surface of the earth and, crucially, in both we find a challenge to the notion that only one single ground can be public. In both we also find architecture without lament, which is confident enough to avoid seeking what could only ever be a sterile modern-age version of the polis.

The challenge that these examples make to the ubiquitous use of figure-ground analysis in city planning is important. In the twenty-first century much of the urban landscape is artificial. People live high above what was once the single ground, which is now hopelessly over-commodified and over-congested. Public facilities exist in elevated artificial interconnected landscapes. Shopping malls and

other quasi-public spaces connect to transportation hubs, which themselves connect to increasingly spatialised networks of transport systems buried deep into the earth and used by millions of people every day. These new grounds often exist on the scale of whole districts. In the twenty-first century city, the very idea of a figure to ground relationship might well become questionable.

This argument is of course not new. In 1994 Rem Koolhaas put forward his theory of “Bigness”, arguing that figure might consume and contain ground in the gigantic programmes that defined the contemporary city. “Bigness surrenders the field to after-architecture” he said.⁵³ The Unité and the Barbican are “big” - huge - but un-surrendering. Both are full of architecture. Perhaps somewhat perversely, it is to this “social” past, and to the social age of architecture, that we may need to look to discover if new relationships might offer potentials for the future city. These need to be potentials for not only a more efficient use of the city, increasing its compactness and absorbing the huge growth of population, but for new fields of urban propinquity, and with those, new forms of public. Can the artificial city resist what, in the post-social age, has become the enforced consensus of its expropriation? Otherwise, in Arendt’s words:

It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which started with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.⁵⁴

Notes

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- ¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52.
 - ² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24. Arendt is quoting Werner Jaeger, in: Werner Jaeger, *Paidera: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1944), III, 111.
 - ³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28.
 - ⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.
 - ⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.
 - ⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.
 - ⁷ Peter Baehr, “The ‘Masses’ in Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Totalitarianism,” *The Good Society* 16, no. 2 (2007): 16.

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- 8 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 41.
- 9 Ibid., 43.
- 10 Ibid., 43.
- 11 Ibid., 43.
- 12 Ibid., 199.
- 13 Ibid., 136.
- 14 Kenneth Frampton's phenomenological reading uses Arendt to call for a tectonic will for "permanence" in architecture - a return to an architecture of "worldliness" from the "worldlessness" of the modern age through its grounding, both physically on the earth and interpretatively within a formal "tradition". Kenneth Frampton, *Towards an Ontological Architecture: A Philosophical Excursus*, in *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form*, Kenneth Frampton, ed. Ashley Simone (Zurich, Lars Müller Publishers, 2015), 18. Reinhold Martin's politico-philosophical reading draws on the ideas of the "common" in the work of Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth*. Reinhold Martin, *Public and Common(s)*, in Reinhold Martin, *Mediators: Aesthetics, Politics, and the City*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 42.
- 15 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 58.
- 16 Ibid., 314.
- 17 Samuel Moyn, "Hannah Arendt on the Secular," *New German Critique* 105, vol. 35, no. 3 (fall 2008): 71.
- 18 Moyn, "Hannah Arendt on the Secular," 74.
- 19 Ibid., 74.
- 20 Jacques Sbriglio, *Le Corbusier: L'Unité d'habitation de Marseilles*, (Basel, Birkhäuser, 2003), 176. A letter from Le Corbusier to his mother is transcribed.
- 21 Fondation Le Corbusier.
<http://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/corbuweb/morpheus.aspx?sysId=13&IrisObjectId=5234&sysLanguage=en-en&itemPos=58&itemCount=78&sysParentId=64&sysParentName=home>. (accessed November 11, 2019).
- 22 Willy Boesiger (Ed.), *Le Corbusier Oeuvre Complète, vol. 8, 1965-1969*, Zurich, 1970 Les Editions d'Architecture Artemis, p. 169, cited in Jacques Sbriglio, *Le Corbusier: L'Unité d'habitation de Marseilles*, (Basel, Birkhäuser, 2003), 6.
- 23 Gov.UK: Live tables on house building: new build dwellings.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-house-building>, table 209: permanent dwellings completed by tenure and country (accessed November 11, 2019). Government statistics show a fall in annual UK new house completions from around 380,000 in 1969/70 to around 152,500 in 2014/15.
- 24 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1976), 48.
- 25 Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, 178.
- 26 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 84.
- 27 Ivan Zaknic, *The Final Testament of Pere Corbu: A Translation and Interpretation of Mise au point*, (New Haven / London, Yale University Press, 1997), 39. Zaknic refers to Le Corbusier's statement, toward the end of his life, embittered by the misappropriation of his ideas on housing and urbanism.

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- 28 Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City*, (Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1978), 68.
- 29 Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Arendt opens the prologue with an account of the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957, using it to illustrate the “scientific” will of modern man to escape the imprisonment of nature. In the quotation, she refers to the inscription carved on the funeral obelisk of a Russian Scientist.
- 30 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 255.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 256.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 256.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 257.
- 34 Margaret Thatcher’s Government introduced the “right to buy” scheme in 1980, under the Housing Act 1980. It offered council tenants the opportunity to purchase their homes at discounted prices, thus transferring housing stock from public to private ownership.
- 35 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 29-30.
- 36 Douglas Keay, Interview with Margaret Thatcher. *Woman’s Own*, 10 Downing Street, 1987, Thatcher Archive (THCR 5/2/262): COI transcript.
- 37 Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, (Cambridge, Polity, 1998). Giddens re-evaluates the role of the state in his argument on necessary reforms of centre-left politics more aligned with the forces of global finance.
- 38 *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, Episode 1*. Directed by Adam Curtis. BBC documentary, 2011. Curtis highlights the global importance of this meeting.
- 39 Kate Barker, *The Barker Review of Housing Supply*, HMSO, 2006.
- 40 Kate Barker, *Housing: Where’s the Plan?*, (London, London Publishing Partnership, 2014).
- 41 Les Christie, *Special Report, Issue #1: America’s Money Crisis, Foreclosures up a record 81% in 2008*, CNN Money.com, January 15, 2009, https://money.cnn.com/2009/01/15/real_estate/millions_in_foreclosure/.
- 42 Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge / London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. Piketty argues that the twentieth century presents a distorted picture of capitalism, the rate of return on capital having been significantly reduced by two world wars. In the twenty-first century, Piketty argues that the central contradiction of capitalism has returned, and will continue - that is, in a market economy based on private property, the rate of return on capital will always exceed the rate of growth of income and output, thus continually escalating global wealth inequality.
- 43 Matthew Carmona, “Housing Design Quality - Auditing England.” <https://matthew-carmona.com/2019/06/26/64-housing-design-quality-auditing-england/> (accessed November 11, 2019).
- 44 Richard Orange, “Stockholm says no to Apple 'town square' in its oldest park,” *Guardian Cities / Guardian.com*, Nov 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/nov/01/stockholm-apple-town-square-park-kings-garden-kungstradgarden>.
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- 47 Lefebvre, *The Right to the City*, 158.

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- ⁴⁸ Jack Shenker, *Revealed: The insidious creep of pseudo-public space in London*, Guardian Cities / Guardian.com, Jul 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jul/24/revealed-pseudo-public-space-pops-london-investigation-map>.
- ⁴⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 47-48.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 38.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 29.
- ⁵² Peter Barber, *Project Interrupted*, (London, The Architecture Foundation, 2018), 50.
- ⁵³ Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *SMLXL*, (Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 1995), 516.
- ⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 322.

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