

# 'The plan's the thing'

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As planning today becomes an ever-more protracted process, Alex Ely takes a personal look at a book featuring some old-fashioned, even unfashionable, designs

*The Residential Floor Plan: Standard and Ideal*, by Delft Architectural Studies on Housing, NAI Publishers, August 2010, £33.50

The nature of housing delivery in the UK leaves little scope for the architect to design with integrity. Our fragmented procurement process means decisions about forms of construction or a cohesive environmental approach often have to be left until after the concept or design development stages; it seems that the contractor 'knows best'. As a consequence, with limited opportunity for coherent thinking, I have developed a fixation with the design of the plan as a territory that still offers scope for innovation and careful thought.

When reading plans, I look for patterns, for logarithms or for a clear and legible parti. For example is a three-storey 5.5 x 9m unit the optimum structural shell to alternatively accommodate a one-bed flat with a two-bed maisonette, a three-bed house with a garage or a four-bed house? Are the proportions efficient in terms of the ratio between net and gross, in order to get the best habitable rooms within the cost? I look for detail such as whether there is enough storage appropriately distributed, are shallow kitchen cupboards better for efficiency than deep ones? Should doors swing into the room in order to maintain some privacy or against the wall for aspect and social interaction? To misappropriate *Hamlet* >> 'The plan's the thing', revealing the visible evidence of the architect's thought process and their priorities. In questioning the plan we question the very nature of habitation.

My preferred housing books tend not to be the coffee table glossies but the likes of publisher Birkhäuser's *Floor Plan Manual* or Jeremy Till and Tatjana Shneider's excellent *Flexible Housing*. So when *The Residential Floor Plan: Standard and Ideal*, by Delft Architectural Studies on Housing, landed on my desk I initially cursed as it seemed to be the book that I'd been planning to write. At least Delft has saved me the trouble, and it is a good housing manual. It contains astute, carefully considered essays alongside really well-sourced housing schemes with consistently drawn floor plans, photos and synopses. They are the sort of schemes that just aren't fashionable today, which makes them all the more interesting – Henryk Buszko and Aleksander Franta's 1979 housing in Katowice for instance or Van den Broek's Delft Housing of 1964 or closer to home Douglas Stephen & Partners' Corringham scheme in west London.

More importantly, it is a book with a purpose. The agenda today may have swapped 20th-century mass production for mass customisation, but apparently 'standard' solutions still prove the rule in everyday volume housing practice. The book considers two approaches: on the one hand, the search for new typologies, familiar from modern architecture and the welfare state, and on the other typological invention, which takes existing house-building conventions as its starting point.

Essays range from Bart Goldhoorn's on totally standardised, Soviet Russian mass housing and its shift from standard urban block under communism to the urban block standard in its current free-market climate, to Dorine van Hoogstraten's reflection on John Habraken's work of the 1960s that advocated a distinction between support and infill; offering an alternative to mass housing focused on means of production. Industry could capitalise on the efficient manufacture of components for support while allowing individuals freedom of choice with regards to the infill; an approach not unlike Jeremy Till's classification of 'soft' and 'hard' architectural elements that offer different degrees of flexibility and choice.

As much as I delight in books like this, the concept of 'ideal' and 'standard' is unfortunately at odds with the way we are able to design today. The Corringham scheme, for example, is a model of efficiency through complexity and as much as I would like to emulate the plan, I wouldn't be able to because of the ever-advancing set of regulations that we face such as the Lifetime Homes Standard, which the scheme doesn't meet. The notion of the 'ideal-standard floor plan' is, therefore, something of an oxymoron, ideals change with time while our concept of 'standard' shifts from noun to adjective. As soon as we have built what we consider to be an ideal set of types, and suitable for reuse in subsequent projects, they are obsolete and we have to redesign them to meet a changing context. Still, such a shifting landscape keeps my fixation of designing plans occupied, and my appetite for such books maintained. This is a great book for its historical analysis and to remind us that architects have a useful role constantly re-inventing the rulebook and searching for the ideal.

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