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PREFACE

Introduction

Architects create space—and space, in turn, shapes society. Every wall connects some people and separates others; every threshold welcomes one person while placing an obstacle before another; every square belongs to some while quietly excluding others. Architecture is therefore never merely the art of form and construction: it is always also a tacit proposal for how people will live together. This textbook is based on the conviction that an architect who recognizes this dual nature of their work designs better—and that urban sociology offers the tools with which to read the city in this way.

The aim of this book is to present these tools clearly and practically without sacrificing theoretical depth. It is neither a history of sociology nor a glossary of concepts for their own sake. Rather, it shows how space produces power and inequality, how it tacitly presupposes a particular kind of body, how it carries memory, how it is maintained and controlled, how global flows pass through it—and what all of this means for a concrete design.

The book therefore follows a consistent structure. Each chapter begins with a concrete case, draws a theory from it, and concludes by considering what the case means for the architect's work. Cases have deliberately been selected at two scales: international examples (Pruitt-Igoe, Bijlmermeer, Central Park, High Line, Sidewalk Toronto) stand alongside Czech ones (Prague's riverfront embankment, Karlín, Chanov, Kasárna Karlín), showing that the same mechanisms operate both at home and abroad—albeit at different scales and with different actors. Thirteen thematic chapters are organized around tensions found in every city: center and periphery, norm and body, permanence and temporariness, control and freedom, global and local. The fourteenth chapter is methodological and deals with participation and co-creation; the concluding appendix provides an overview of key authors in the field.

Each chapter includes a recurring set of learning tools: a series of "How to Read…" questions that can be applied to one's own project, an overview of

key concepts, questions for reflection, and a field exercise. The exercises build on one another and together form a short course in research methods. Anyone who completes them all will have conducted a small sociological investigation of the city over the course of a semester.

This textbook is intended primarily for master's students of architecture, but it is written to be useful to anyone whose professional work touches the city: urban designers, planners, heritage conservation specialists, public administrators, and informed general readers. It can be read from beginning to end or chapter by chapter; each chapter stands on its own, while cross-references gradually build the book's overarching argument.

One final observation, small but essential: reading the city sociologically does not mean trading the certainty of a drawing for idle speculation. It means seeing more—and bearing greater, better-informed responsibility for what we design. That is what this book is meant to help achieve.

CHAPTER 1

Why Sociology for Architects?

Between the Drawing and Life

“A house is a machine for living in.”

— Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture (1923)

“Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 p.m.”

— Charles Jencks, The Language of Post-Modern Architecture (1977)

1.1 The Building That “Died”

Almost everyone recognizes a particular photograph without knowing what it depicts. An eleven-story concrete slab collapses in broad daylight into a cloud of dust: a charge explodes at the base of the building; for a moment it trembles, as though hesitating, and then the entire structure falls. The image of the implosion traveled around the world in 1972 and became one of the most frequently cited architectural photographs of the twentieth century. Ironically, it is an icon of failure.

The building was part of the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in the northern part of St. Louis, United States. More precisely, it was not a single building: the development consisted of thirty-three identical eleven-story slabs, containing a total of 2,870 apartments on twenty-three hectares, and was designed for approximately ten thousand residents (Bristol 1991). It was designed by Minoru Yamasaki, a gifted modernist who, two decades later, would design the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center. The development was first occupied in 1954 and initially praised by the professional press. It had everything postwar modernism believed in: light, air, greenery between buildings, “streets in the sky” in the form of wide

shared access galleries where neighbors were supposed to meet, and economical elevators that stopped only on every third floor, encouraging people to walk along communal corridors and thereby, almost inadvertently, form a community.

Less than twenty years later, it was a ruin. Apartments stood empty, elevators no longer worked, and the shared access galleries, designed precisely to encourage encounters between neighbors, were nicknamed “alleys” by residents because walking through them meant risking assault. Maintenance workers refused to enter the buildings. In 1969, tenants launched a nine-month strike for tolerable living conditions, one of the first successful rent strikes in public housing in the United States. By the time the decision to demolish the development was made, only about six hundred residents remained in a complex built for ten thousand people. The first building was blown up on March 16, 1972, the second on April 21, 1972, and it was the photograph of the second implosion that became famous. Demolition continued until 1976.





Fig. 1.1. Demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, St. Louis, 1972. A photograph that, according to Charles Jencks, “buried” modern architecture. As this chapter will show, it tells us less about architecture than it seems to.

Architectural critic Charles Jencks turned the implosion into a symbol of an entire era. In the book that gave postmodernism its name, he declared that modern architecture had died at the precise moment of the demolition, even specifying the day, hour, and minute. The dating was a rhetorical exaggeration, and Jencks himself later described it as a deliberate provocation. Yet it caught on because it expressed a conviction already in the air: that the experiment with bright, rational, vertically stacked “machines for living” simply had not worked. Architecture had promised something and failed to deliver.

The very statement “architecture failed” is a useful starting point for this book. It sounds clear and compelling, and yet it is largely untrue. Understanding why it is untrue requires a sociological way of thinking.

1.2 Two Stories About One Building

Two stories can be told about Pruitt-Igoe. Both use the same facts; they differ only in where they locate the cause.

Story one — the failure of form. Architects believed in an abstract vision. They stacked poor families into anonymous concrete towers and cut them off from the street, shops, and everyday life. The long shared corridors belonged to no one, so no one looked after them, and they became dangerous territory. Height, repetition, and bare surfaces produced alienation. Form produced behavior; had Yamasaki designed low-rise houses with small gardens, people would have lived orderly lives. The blame lies in the drawing.

This story is seductive because it attributes enormous power to architecture and thereby flatters it. Decisions made at the drawing board count for more than anything else. That is precisely why we should be wary of it.

Story two — the failure of structure. Behind the drawing, an entirely different picture emerges (Bristol 1991; Freidrichs 2011).

To begin with, Yamasaki did not choose the height or density. The number of apartments, the density of development, and even the decision to build thirty-three eleven-story slabs had been determined by the federal public housing authority long before the architect had a say. Federal legislation, moreover, funded only construction. Operation and maintenance were supposed to be paid for out of rents. But St. Louis was emptying out at precisely that time. Industry was disappearing, middle-class and white families were moving to the suburbs (a movement known as white flight), and between 1950 and 1990 the city lost more than half its population. The complex was initially racially segregated: the Pruitt buildings were intended for Black tenants and Igoe for white tenants. After segregation ended, white residents left almost entirely. The poorest remained. Rents were insufficient to cover maintenance; without it, elevators broke down and water stopped running. Those who could move away did so, rental income fell further, the housing development emptied out, and the vicious circle tightened.

In this account, architecture is not innocent, but it is not the main cause. The main causes lie outside the design: in how money is distributed, who is allowed to live where, where capital flows, and whom the state abandons. In the words of revisionist historians, Yamasaki became the scapegoat for forces he could not control.

European parallels show that Pruitt-Igoe was not an American exception. Amsterdam's Bijlmermeer, built from the late 1960s according to CIAM principles as a honeycomb of ten-story megablocks for one hundred thousand inhabitants, followed a similar trajectory. Once celebrated as a vision of the "city of the future," it became a symbol of decline. Later reassessments identified the principal causes as delayed infrastructure (the metro and public amenities arrived years late), housing-allocation policies, and the concentration of newcomers without support, including migrants from Suriname after 1975 (Wassenberg 2013). London's Robin Hood Gardens, designed by the Smithsons, was completed in the same year Pruitt-Igoe came down and rested on the same idea of "streets in the sky." Beginning in 2017, it was gradually demolished, but the Victoria and Albert Museum rescued a three-story section of its facade and displayed it at the Venice Architecture Biennale. The same building was thus declared both a social failure and a monument of world architecture. The pattern recurs from French grands ensembles to Central European prefabricated housing estates. The story that "architecture failed" is told everywhere, and later research everywhere complicates it in the same direction: toward money, management, maintenance, and the allocation of housing.

The facts, then, are the same; the interpretations are two. One seeks the cause in the shape of the building, the other in the organization of society. The ability to recognize which interpretation is more accurate — and above all, the ability to see the second story at all — has a name in sociology and is one of its fundamental tools.

Question about the case. If Pruitt-Igoe had been built as low-rise family houses, but under the same economic and political conditions (a shrinking city, no funds for maintenance, the poorest residents), would it have fared better? Conversely, would Bijlmermeer have ended up the same way if the metro, schools, and shops had arrived on time? Your answers reveal a great deal about what you currently believe has power.

1.3 The Sociological Imagination

The American sociologist C. Wright Mills named this ability in his book The Sociological Imagination (1959). It is perhaps the most important concept in this textbook.

Mills noticed that people experience their lives as a sequence of personal stories (work, family, housing, debts, good luck, bad luck), and that they also interpret most of what happens to them in personal terms. I could not find a job because I did not try hard enough. I have nowhere to live because I managed my life badly. Such explanations are often appropriate. Just as often, however, they conceal something larger.

Mills illustrated this through unemployment. If one person is unemployed in a city of one hundred thousand, this is a personal trouble. It relates to that person's abilities, character, and the opportunities they did or did not have, and the solution is individual. But if, in a country with fifty million working people, there are fifteen million unemployed people, it is difficult to speak of the personal failure of fifteen million individual characters. This is now a public issue. Something has gone wrong in the organization of society, in the economy, in institutions, in the structure of opportunities; the solution therefore cannot be found in individual biographies. Only a change in that organization can help.

The sociological imagination is the ability to see the connection between an individual's biography and the history of the society in which that individual lives. Someone who possesses it can shift their gaze from the detail to the whole and back again. They take a personal experience and ask what broader forces have shaped it; they take a large structure and ask how it affects a particular life.

In Pruitt-Igoe, the two readings can be located precisely. The first story is a reading without the sociological imagination. It sees only the building and its immediate effect, the "personal trouble" of the architect and the residents. The second story shows the sociological imagination in action. It takes the same ruin, asks what historical and structural forces produced it, and finds deindustrialization, racial segregation, the funding model, and capital flight.

The entire question concerns more than sociology alone. It is urgent for architecture because architects work precisely at the boundary Mills described. A building is always both things at once. It is concrete matter on a particular plot, which a particular person will inhabit tomorrow: a piece of biography. At the same time, it is the product and instrument of large structures (money, laws, norms, power relations), and therefore a piece of history. Those who see only the first dimension draw attractive plans into a void. Those who see only the second write manifestos and build nothing.

Architecture needs both, and it is precisely this double vision that lies at the heart of urban sociology for architects.

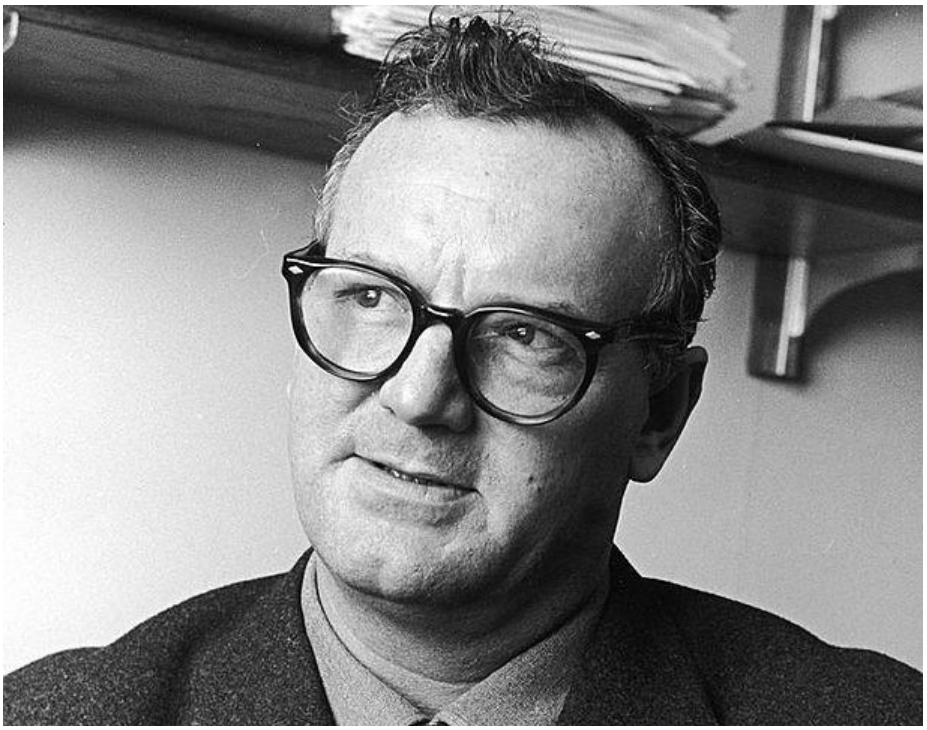

Fig. 1.2. C. Wright Mills (1916–1962). The concept of the “sociological imagination” is the best tool against the temptation to interpret everything in personal terms.

1.4 Social Fact: Why “Society” Is Not Merely the Sum of Individuals

An objection to the argument so far immediately suggests itself. Society does not build or inhabit anything. People build and live in buildings. “Structure” is an abstraction; only specific people and their decisions are real. This is a good objection and carries considerable philosophical weight. Sociology answers it with a concept older than Mills, one that belongs to the very foundations of the discipline: the social fact.

The term was introduced by Émile Durkheim, one of sociology’s founders, in The Rules of Sociological Method (1895). According to him, there are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that have three properties in relation to the individual. They are external (they existed before the person and will exist after them), coercive (they exert pressure whether the person is aware of it or not), and collective (they are shared by society rather than

being anyone’s private invention). Durkheim called such phenomena social facts and insisted that they be studied “as things,” as objectively as a natural scientist studies a stone.

Language is an example. None of its speakers invented it. It existed long before them; they learned it and cannot change it at will, because if they began assigning their own meanings to words, no one would understand them. Language is external, coercive, and collective: it is a social fact. The same applies to money, laws, fashion, rules of politeness, and traffic regulations. None of these is “natural”; all were made by people, yet they resist individuals as firmly as gravity.

Durkheim went further still, demonstrating his thesis through the most personal act imaginable: suicide (Suicide, 1897). He showed that even where one might expect nothing but individual despair, stable suicide rates exist. Year after year they remain at almost the same level and vary systematically with the strength of social cohesion: they are higher where integration is weaker, for example among Protestants compared with Catholics, or unmarried people compared with married people. An individual suicide is the tragedy of a particular person; the suicide rate of an entire group is a social fact. Even the most intimate experiences follow a social pattern.

For design, this means that every project is conceived within a dense network of social facts, whether the designer knows it or not. Even an entrance hall is not drawn into a void. It takes shape in a space where unwritten rules already govern where one may stand and where one may not, how far apart strangers stand in a queue, and who steps aside for whom. An apartment design encounters the social fact called “family,” whose form has changed over the past fifty years (single parents, children living in two households, multigenerational households, adults sharing accommodation). A floor plan either accommodates these forms or people find ways around it. Social facts are as real a material as concrete, except that concrete is visible and social facts usually are not. Making them visible is among the principal tasks of urban sociology.

1.5 Structure and Agency: The Central Tension

Two concepts have appeared so far: the sociological imagination as the capacity to see, and the social fact as what needs to be seen. They are connected by a question that runs through all of sociology and returns in every subsequent chapter: the relationship between structure and agency.

Structure is the sum of the more enduring arrangements that extend beyond us and shape us: institutions, laws, class differences, power relations, social facts. Structure both constrains (people cannot simply do whatever they please) and enables (without language no one could speak, without money no one could exchange goods, without building law no one could build). Agency, by contrast, is the capacity of individuals to choose, to act, to resist and do things differently. People are not puppets of structures. They circumvent them, adapt them to their purposes, and sometimes change them.

Sociologists have always debated which of the two carries greater weight. Emphasize structure too strongly and people appear as helpless chess pieces. Emphasize agency too strongly and everything that presses upon, constrains, and predetermines people disappears from view, leaving the naive idea that everyone makes their own fate and is therefore personally to blame for it. Most good sociology avoids both extremes and takes both sides seriously. The best-known attempt to resolve this dispute theoretically is Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration. For him, structure and agency are not two opposing forces but two aspects of the same process. Structure is both the medium of action and its continually reproduced outcome (the duality of structure). Language is again the best illustration. By speaking we submit to its rules, yet by speaking we also keep it alive and gradually transform it. (The book reserves another influential attempt, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, for its concluding chapter.)

For architecture, what matters is that a building stands precisely at the hinge between structure and agency. It is produced by structure because money, regulations, property relations, and power interests have determined what will be built, where, how high, and for whom (Yamasaki, as we know, had the height and density imposed from above). At the same time, a building helps shape the actions of those who live in it. It opens some possibilities and closes others, invites some people in and stops others at the door.

Here lies a trap into which architecture falls especially easily, and it even has a name: architectural determinism. This is the belief that form directly and reliably determines behavior. Build “streets in the sky” and a community will emerge; build towers and alienation will follow. The first story about Pruitt-Igoe is pure architectural determinism. Determinism also has an academic history. In Utopia on Trial (1985), the British geographer Alice Coleman attributed vandalism and crime in London housing estates directly to measurable features of their form and recommended redesigning the estates. Later criticism, however, showed that her correlations weakened once residents’ poverty and housing-allocation practices were taken into account. Chapter 4 will return to this trap in detail. Determinism is doubly dangerous: it is false (behavior is also shaped by structures beyond the architect’s reach) and seductive (it flatters professional power). Form neither determines behavior nor leaves it untouched. It makes some actions easier and others harder, invites certain uses and discourages others, always in interplay with human agency and surrounding structures. A staircase can facilitate encounters; it cannot command them. A wall can facilitate exclusion, but no wall can cause or eliminate the poverty behind it.

Taking creative power seriously without falling for the illusion that form can solve problems of money, power, and institutions means walking a narrow line. Staying on that line is among the most difficult—and most valuable—skills in architectural thinking.

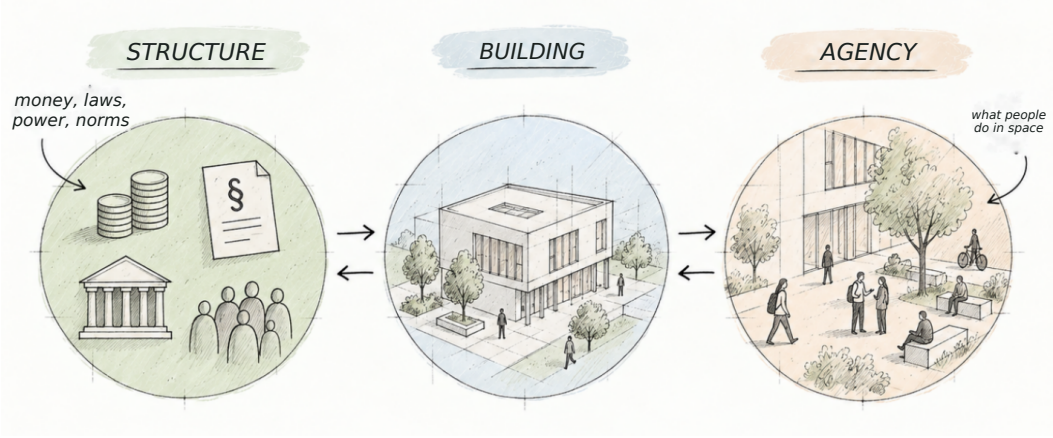

Fig. 1.3. The building as a hinge between structure and agency. The arrows run in both directions. Structures produce the building; the building helps shape action; and changed action can, over time, feed back into structures (Giddens’s duality of structure).

1.6 The Thesis of This Book: Space Is Social, Society Is Spatial

The whole book rests on one sentence. It has two halves, and both are true at once.

Space is social. No space is a neutral container into which life is merely “poured.” Every spatial arrangement embodies decisions about who belongs where, what matters, what is permitted, and what is not. A square, a fence, a reception desk, a staircase, and a property boundary are social relations translated into matter.

Society is spatial. No social relationship exists outside space. Power, inequality, family, community, memory, and surveillance do not take place in some kind of ether. All require a location, whether offices, bedrooms, cemeteries, cameras, or fences. Understanding society means looking at where it happens.

For sociology, the discovery is the second half of the sentence: society always has a spatial form, something the discipline long overlooked. For architecture, the revolutionary part is the first. It says that every drawing is a silent hypothesis about social life. Choosing to open the kitchen into the living room is an assumption about what family life should look like and who should be visible while cooking. A single shared entrance instead of two separate ones embodies a judgment about whether different people should meet. And a bench shaped so that nobody can lie on it presupposes who belongs in public space and who does not.

Such hypotheses are made regardless. The only question is whether consciously or inadvertently. Without sociological imagination, an architect makes them inadvertently and is then surprised that “people use the building incorrectly.” With sociological imagination, the architect knows that there is no such thing as “incorrect use.” There is only a difference between what was assumed and how people actually live, and this difference is the most valuable feedback an architect can receive.

1.7 How to Read a Building Sociologically

Sociological imagination can be learned because it is a habit of asking questions. The following set is deliberately simple and can be applied to any space, from a bus stop to an opera house. The book will return to it and refine it, but even in this rough form it reveals more than an ordinary glance can capture.

Who paid for the space, and who benefits from it? Money usually reveals whom a place serves, even when it speaks the language of the common good.

Whom does the space invite in, and whom does it stop? Every place has thresholds, some made of stone, others unspoken. The difference lies in who passes through them without a second thought and who hesitates or turns back.

Which behaviors does the space facilitate, and which does it make harder? The verb “facilitate” is deliberately chosen instead of “determine.” Where can one sit, linger, hide, meet others, or be alone?

What is visible, and what is concealed? A grand staircase versus a staff entrance; rubbish bins, technical facilities, and the people who clean.

What happens when someone uses the space “differently”? Skateboarders on marble, laundry on a balcony, a flower planted without permission in a municipal flower bed. A departure from the intended use often reveals the intention better than anything else.

These five questions contain the entire method of the book in miniature.

1.8 What Sociology Cannot Offer (and What It Can)

It is worth saying what sociology is not good for. It has three limitations.

It does not provide form. No sociological theory produces a floor plan, the height of a building, or the appearance of a facade. That remains the architect’s work.

It does not provide certainty. Sociology does not predict behavior as reliably as physics predicts a falling stone. People are creative and defiant

and cannot be predicted, because alongside structure there is also their agency. Sociology increases the likelihood of a sound judgment, but it does not guarantee one.

It does not absolve us of responsibility. Quite the opposite. Once it becomes clear that a drawing is a hypothesis about social life, the excuse “I only drew it” no longer holds.

So what does sociology offer? Better questions. It reveals what would otherwise remain hidden: social facts, structures, and power relations embodied in material form. It guards against the most embarrassing professional mistake: believing that problems of money and power can be solved through form. And it provides both humility and confidence. Humility, because we can see how much of the outcome lies beyond the architect’s control; confidence, because we can also see that narrow but real range in which decisions about form genuinely change people’s lives.

Pruitt-Igoe does not prove that architecture is powerless, but that architecture alone is not enough. And an architect can hardly do anything worse than believe the opposite. If space is not a neutral container, how does it actually come into being? Who “produces” it, and how? That is the subject of the next chapter.

Key Concepts in This Chapter

Sociological imagination (C. W. Mills) — the ability to see connections between personal biography and historical or structural forces, and to shift perspective between the individual and society as a whole.

Personal trouble vs. public issue (Mills) — the distinction between what can be explained and addressed individually and what is a manifestation of how society is organized.

Social fact (É. Durkheim) — a way of acting, thinking, and feeling that is external to the individual, coercive, and collective (language, money, laws, norms). It is real even though human beings created it.

Structure vs. agency — the relationship between arrangements that extend beyond us (and both constrain and enable us) and individuals’ capacity to choose and act.

Duality of structure (A. Giddens) — structure as both the medium and the continually reproduced outcome of action. The most influential theoretical attempt to dissolve the dualism between structure and agency.

Architectural determinism — the mistaken belief that form directly and reliably determines behavior. Architecture falls into this trap especially easily (compare Coleman, 1985, and criticism of her work).

The book's thesis — space is social (every arrangement embodies social decisions), and society is spatial (every social relationship takes place somewhere). It follows that every drawing is a hypothesis about social life.

Questions for Reflection

Choose a building or public space generally considered "successful" or "unsuccessful." Can both stories from section 1.2 be told about it, one attributing the cause to form and the other to structure? Which story is heard more often in public debate, and why?

Apply Mills's distinction between personal trouble and public issue to housing. What phenomenon in Czechia is commonly interpreted as a personal failure, although it could also be understood as a public issue? What changes when you switch perspectives?

Find three social facts (in Durkheim's sense) that a person encounters when entering any building. How would the building have to change to circumvent them? Is that even possible?

Robin Hood Gardens was demolished as a social failure and simultaneously preserved in a museum as an architectural monument. What does this ambiguity tell us about the relationship between aesthetic and social judgments of architecture?

Is it true that "there is no such thing as using space incorrectly, only a difference between assumption and life" (section 1.6)? Where are the limits of this claim?

Field Exercise 1: Reading a Place

Choose a public or semi-public place you pass through every day (a bus stop, a station concourse, the forecourt of a faculty building, a shopping arcade), and spend twenty minutes simply observing it, without designing anything. Work through the five questions in section 1.7 and record a specific observation for each. Pay particular attention to the fifth question and capture at least one instance in which someone used the space "differently" from how it was evidently intended. Submit one page of text or one page of sketches with notes. The exercise in the next chapter will build on these observations.

Sources and Recommended Reading

Classic texts (the core of the chapter):

Mills, C. W. (1959). The Sociological Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press. (Czech edition: Sociologická imaginace. Prague: SLON.) For this chapter, the first chapter, "The Promise," is sufficient.

Durkheim, É. (1895). Les règles de la méthode sociologique. (Czech edition: Pravidla sociologické metody.) The key passage is the definition of the social fact.

Durkheim, É. (1897). Le suicide. For an idea of how a social fact is studied "as a thing."

Giddens, A. (1984). The Constitution of Society. Cambridge: Polity Press. On the duality of structure and the theory of structuration.

On the Pruitt-Igoe case:

Bristol, K. G. (1991). "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth." Journal of Architectural Education, 44(3), 163–171. A foundational revisionist study; freely accessible versions are available in university repositories (green open access).

Freidrichs, C. (2011). The Pruitt-Igoe Myth (documentary film, USA). Based on accounts by former residents; suitable introductory material for a seminar.

Heathcott, J. (2012). “Pruitt-Igoe and the Critique of Public Housing.” Journal of the American Planning Association, 78(4). A historical reconstruction of the operational and fiscal causes of decline.

Comparative cases (Europe):

Wassenberg, F. (2013). Large Housing Estates: Ideas, Rise, Fall and Recovery. The Bijlmermeer Case. Amsterdam: IOS Press / TU Delft. A detailed monograph on the Amsterdam case.

Victoria & Albert Museum: documentation of the fragment of Robin Hood Gardens (saved in 2017, exhibited at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018) — vam.ac.uk.

Coleman, A. (1985). Utopia on Trial. London: Hilary Shipman. An influential—and methodologically contested—defence of architectural determinism; read alongside critiques of her work.

Supplementary:

Jencks, C. (1977). The Language of Post-Modern Architecture. London: Academy Editions. For the original (and now disputed) declaration of the “death of modern architecture.”