

Place-Making Theory behind Claremont Court

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Abstract : This paper aims to elaborate the architectural theory on place-making that supported Claremont Court housing scheme (Edinburgh, United Kingdom). Claremont Court (1959-62) is a large post-war mixed development housing scheme designed by Basil Spence, which included 'place-making' as one of its founding principles. Although some stylistic readings of the housing scheme have been published, the theory on place-making that allegedly ruled the design has yet to be clarified. The architecture allows us to mark or make a place within space in order to dwell. Under the framework of contemporary philosophical theories of place, this paper aims to explore the relationship between place and dwelling through a cross-disciplinary reading of Claremont Court, with a view to develop an architectural theory on place-making. Since dwelling represents the way we are immersed in our world in an existential manner, this theme is not just relevant for architecture but also for philosophy and sociology. The research in this work is interpretive-historic in nature. It examines documentary evidence of the original architectural design, together with relevant literature in sociology, history, and architecture, through the lens of theories of place. First, the paper explores how the dwelling types originally included in Claremont Court supported ideas of dwelling or meanings of home. Then, it traces shared space and social ties in order to study the symbolic boundaries that allow the creation of a collective identity or sense of belonging. Finally, the relation between the housing scheme and the supporting theory is identified. The findings of this research reveal Scottish architect Basil Spence's exploration of the meaning of home, as he changed his approach to the mass housing while acting as President of the Royal Incorporation of British Architects (1958-60). When the British Government was engaged in various ambitious building programmes, he sought to drive architecture to a wider socio-political debate as president of the RIBA, hence moving towards a more ambitious and innovative socio-architectural approach. Rather than trying to address the 'genius loci' with an architectural proposition, as has been stated, the research shows that the place-making theory behind the housing scheme was supported by notions of community-based on shared space and dispositions. The design of the housing scheme was steered by a desire to foster social relations and collective identities, rather than by the idea of keeping the spirit of the place. This research is part of a cross-disciplinary project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The findings present Claremont Court as a signifier of Basil Spence's attempt to address the post-war political debate on housing in United Kingdom. They highlight the architect's theoretical agenda and challenge current purely stylistic readings of Claremont Court as they fail to acknowledge its social relevance.

Keywords : architectural theory, dwelling, place-making, post-war housing

Conference Title : ICATCP 2017 : International Conference on Architectural Theory and Construction Processes

Conference Location : Zurich, Switzerland

Conference Dates : January 13-14, 2017