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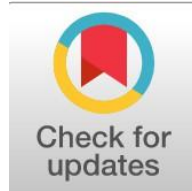
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Housing Policies and Urban Transformation in France and England in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

General Background: Housing policies and urban transformation became major public issues in Europe during the twentieth century due to industrialization, urbanization, and wartime destruction. **Specific Background:** France and England faced similar housing shortages and reconstruction challenges but adopted different planning and governance approaches. **Knowledge Gap:** Comparative evaluations of how these approaches shaped long-term spatial and social outcomes remain limited. **Aims:** This study compares housing policies and urban transformation processes in France and England using Le Havre and Birmingham as case studies. **Results:** The findings show that France implemented a centralized and state-led housing model focused on mass social housing and modernist reconstruction, while England adopted a more decentralized approach emphasizing slum clearance and municipal housing. Both approaches addressed housing shortages but generated different long-term social and spatial problems, including social segregation in France and population displacement in England. **Novelty:** The study links governance structures, planning tools, and urban transformation outcomes within a comparative historical framework. **Implications:** The research highlights the importance of evaluating housing policies through both physical and social dimensions of urban transformation.

Highlights:

- Comparative analysis reveals contrasting centralized and decentralized housing governance models in France and England. Le Havre and Birmingham demonstrate different spatial outcomes of post-war reconstruction and urban renewal practices.
- Long-term social challenges emerged from mass housing production, slum clearance, and modernization strategies.

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Introduction

The twentieth century has been a decisive period in terms of housing policies and the transformation of urban space in Europe, as rapid industrialization and urban growth fundamentally altered housing demand and planning practices. With the acceleration of industrialization, intensive migration movements from rural areas to cities have increased the demand for housing in many countries and caused the existing housing stock and urban fabric to be insufficient [1]. This process has brought about an increase in state intervention in the field of housing production and urban planning. France and England have faced similar structural problems throughout the twentieth century; however, their responses to these problems have been shaped by different planning approaches and policy tools [2]. In both countries, the First and Second World Wars led to widespread physical destruction and a serious housing shortage in the cities. In the post-war period, housing policies became an intervention area not only to meet the need for housing, but also to reorganize cities and ensure the stability of the social structure [3].

Housing policies in France have developed through restructuring programs and social housing production, especially after the Second World War. The reconstruction of demolished urban centers and the creation of large-scale mass housing areas in the suburbs have led the state to assume a central role in housing production [4]. While this process aimed to reduce the housing deficit quantitatively, it also led to the emergence of new urban settlement models, reflecting a highly centralized planning approach.

In the UK, housing policies were implemented through slum clearance programs, municipal housing and planned new residential areas. In particular, the 1930 Housing Act and the 1947 City and Country Planning Act strengthened the role of local governments in urban transformation and housing production [5]. These legal regulations have enabled comprehensive interventions in urban centres and accelerated the restructuring of urban space.

These different policy approaches directly affected the spatial consequences of urban regeneration practices in France and England. Different solutions developed against similar problems have had different effects on the shaping of residential areas, settlement density, and social structure [4]. This study addresses these differences by adopting a comparative perspective on housing policy and urban transformation.

This study examines housing policies and urban transformation processes in France and England from a comparative perspective throughout the twentieth century. The study analyzes the effects of industrialization, wars, population movements, and economic fluctuations on housing production and planning decisions. In this context, Le Havre in France and Birmingham in England were selected as case studies; urban interventions implemented in both cities were evaluated through planning approaches and spatial results [6]. In the following sections of the study, the research method is explained first, then the examples of France and England are examined under separate headings, and the findings obtained in the last section are discussed comparatively.

1. Method

1.1 Workspace

In this study, France and England were selected as the study area because they underwent similar structural processes such as industrialization, rapid urbanization, wars, and population movements in the twentieth century. Both countries faced serious housing deficits after the First and Second World Wars, which led to the reshaping of housing policies and urban transformation practices with state intervention. In this context, the choice of France and England allows to comparatively examine how housing policies are implemented within the framework of different planning traditions and governance models.

1.2 Research Method

The study is based on comparative historical analysis and case study methods. This methodological approach aims to evaluate the housing policies developed in France and England during the twentieth century within their historical context and to compare the effects of these policies on urban space.

Within the scope of the research, the development of housing policies was analyzed according to the following criteria:

- the scope of public intervention
- forms of housing production
- planning and implementation tools
- the spatial consequences of urban transformation

were analyzed in line with these criteria. These criteria were used to systematically evaluate the similarities and differences between the policies implemented in the two countries.

1.3 Case Selection and Data Sources

In this study, the cities of Le Havre in France and Birmingham in England were selected as case studies. Le Havre represents a comprehensive post-Second World War reconstruction process, while Birmingham is considered an industrial city where slum clearance, municipal housing provision, and urban renewal practices were intensively implemented. These cities are comparable in terms of their ability to illustrate the spatial outcomes of housing policies within different planning contexts.

The study is based on secondary data sources. Accordingly, academic publications, historical documents, planning legislation, and official reports were examined, and data on housing policies and urban transformation processes were comparatively analyzed.

2. Housing Policies and Urban Transformation in France (Twentieth Century)

2.1 Urbanization and Housing Problem in the Early Twentieth Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, France experienced an intense wave of rural-to-urban migration as a result of accelerating industrialization. This process led to rapid population growth and an increasingly inadequate housing stock, especially in Paris and large industrial cities. The population concentrated in urban centers contributed to the spread of low-standard and unhealthy housing areas; consequently, the housing problem has become a structural problem directly related to social inequalities [7].

During this period, housing production was largely carried out by the private sector, and the state's intervention in the housing market remained limited. However, the deterioration of existing housing conditions and the deepening housing problems of the working class gradually paved the way for housing to be recognized as a public issue [8].

2.2 The Impact of the First and Second World Wars

The First World War caused extensive physical destruction, particularly in the northern regions of France, and severely damaged the housing infrastructure. Post-war reconstruction activities aimed not only to repair destroyed buildings but also to modernize urban space. During this process, infrastructure investments, the development of transportation networks, and the planning of new housing areas became key priorities [9].

The Second World War further deepened the housing crisis in France. During the war, many urban centers were subjected to heavy bombardment, and housing production nearly came to a halt. The substantial housing deficit that emerged after the war led the state to assume a more central and interventionist role in housing policy.

2.3 State Intervention and Mass Housing Policies in the Post-War Period

In the post-1945 period, housing policies in France focused on rapidly addressing the quantitative housing shortage. In this context, the state assumed a direct role in financing, planning, and implementation processes, and social housing production was actively promoted. From the mid-1950s onward, the Habitation à Loyer Modéré (HLM) system became the primary instrument of housing provision for low- and middle-income groups [10].

Large-scale mass housing projects developed during this period were predominantly concentrated in urban peripheries, contributing to the rapid expansion of suburban areas. Through standardized housing typologies, a high number of housing units were produced within a short period, and the housing crisis was substantially alleviated in quantitative terms. However, over time, this approach generated criticism related to spatial uniformity, social segregation, and declining quality of life among residents.

2.4 Urban Renewal and Quality Discussions (1960-1980)

Since the 1960s, the focus of housing policies in France has shifted from the production of new housing to the improvement of the existing urban fabric. Social and spatial problems, particularly in early mass housing areas, necessitated the development of urban renewal programs. During this process, efforts were directed toward renovating deteriorated buildings, modernizing infrastructure, and improving the overall quality of life [11].

The 1973 oil crisis and the subsequent economic recession slowed the pace of large-scale housing projects and led to the adoption of more cautious and quality-oriented approaches in housing policy. During this period, urban transformation began to be discussed not only in terms of physical renewal but also in relation to social integration and urban sustainability [12].

2.5 Le Havre

Le Havre, one of the most heavily damaged cities in France during the Second World War, represents one of the most striking examples of post-war housing policy and urban reconstruction. As a result of the intense bombardments in 1944,

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most of the city center was destroyed, and approximately eighty percent of the housing stock became unusable. This situation transformed Le Havre not only into a site of physical reconstruction but also into an “experimental ground” where modern urban planning principles could be applied [13].

In the post-war period, the French state approached the reconstruction of Le Havre through a centralized planning framework, assigning this task to the team led by architect Auguste Perret. The reconstruction process aimed to establish a new urban order based on the principles of modernist architecture and rational planning, rather than replicating the pre-war urban fabric. This approach sought to accelerate housing production, modernize infrastructure, and promote healthy living conditions.

The residential areas constructed in Le Havre are notable for their use of reinforced concrete structural systems, standardized housing typologies, and block layouts supported by open green spaces. These features represent an early and systematically planned example of the mass housing policies that later became widespread across post-war France. Housing was designed not only to meet basic shelter needs but also to support a new form of social life [14].

Despite its quantitative achievements, the Le Havre model has faced various criticisms over time. The spatial order generated by modernist planning has been questioned for creating environments that are perceived as inflexible and overly uniform for certain social groups. Nevertheless, Le Havre remains an important reference point for understanding the scope, objectives, and limitations of state-led housing and urban transformation policies in post-war France [15].

The reconstruction process of Le Havre clearly demonstrates that housing policy in France was not merely a response to shelter needs but also functioned as a tool for social reorganization and modernization. In this respect, the city provides a strong case study for evaluating the spatial and political consequences of urban transformation approaches implemented in France throughout the twentieth century.

Figure 1: Le Havre city center after World War II, showing the extent of destruction (January 1945).



Source: Archives Municipales du Havre, Fernez Collection.

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Figure 2: Post-war urban fabric of Le Havre following the reconstruction period (1950s).



Source: Photograph by Annika Bergson.

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3. Housing Policies and Urban Transformation in England (Twentieth Century)

3.1 The Housing Problem in the Early Twentieth Century and the Impact of Industrialization

In the early twentieth century, the housing problem in England became increasingly evident with the acceleration of industrialization and the concentration of population in urban areas. Growing demand for labor in industrial cities led to the concentration of the working class in low-quality and unhealthy housing conditions. This situation transformed housing from a purely physical shelter issue into a policy domain directly linked to social welfare and public health [16].

During this period, housing production in England was largely shaped by private ownership and the rental housing system, and direct state intervention remained limited. However, slums and deteriorated housing areas concentrated in urban centers attracted the attention of public authorities, particularly from the 1920s onward, paving the way for legal reforms in housing policy.

3.2 Institutionalization of State Intervention and Legal Framework

A significant transformation in housing policies in the UK began with the Housing Act of 1930. This legislation aimed at the clearance of unhealthy housing and at enabling local governments to assume a more active role in housing production. Local councils gained the authority to expropriate slum areas and construct new and healthier housing in their place [14].

In the period leading up to the Second World War, housing policies became increasingly planned, and the relationship between housing production and urban planning was strengthened. This approach gained an institutional character with the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, which entered into force in the post-war period. The Act regulated land use in accordance with central planning principles and integrated housing development into a comprehensive planning system [6].

3.3 Post-World War II Reconstruction and New Cities

The destruction of approximately 475,000 houses in England during the Second World War resulted in a severe housing shortage in the post-war period. This situation necessitated the state assuming a more direct and central role in housing production. Post-war policies aimed not only to rebuild destroyed housing but also to guide urban growth [17].

In this context, the New Towns policy was developed, and planned residential areas were established around major cities. These towns aimed to redistribute population in a controlled manner from highly congested urban centers and to create healthier living environments. The New Towns emerged as examples in which housing, transportation, and social facilities were addressed through a holistic planning approach.

3.4 Criticisms and Policy Changes After 1960

Large-scale housing production and urban renewal policies implemented in England during the 1960s and 1970s faced increasing criticism over time. High-rise municipal housing, in particular, was widely debated due to issues of social segregation and declining quality of life. During this period, criticism intensified that housing policies focused solely on quantitative targets contributed to the deepening of spatial and social problems.

Economic crises and oil shocks in the 1970s led to a decline in housing investment and to a redefinition of the role of the state in the housing sector. From the 1980s onward, policies promoting private ownership came to the fore, and a new housing policy approach emerged with the sale of municipal housing and the growing dominance of the private sector in the housing market [18].

3.5 Birmingham: Urban Renewal and Implementation of Housing Policies

The city of Birmingham presents an important case study for examining the spatial consequences of housing policies and urban renewal approaches implemented in England during the twentieth century. Birmingham, one of the centers of the Industrial Revolution, faced severe housing problems in the early period due to rapid population growth and intense industrialization. Low-quality and unhealthy housing areas concentrated in the city center necessitated comprehensive interventions by the mid-twentieth century [7].

Planning approaches developed before and during the Second World War formed the basic framework of urban transformation in Birmingham. Under the Town and Country Planning Act of 1944, local authorities gained the power to expropriate large areas, remove obsolete building stock, and redevelop these areas. In this process, approximately 1,100 acres adjacent to Birmingham's city center were replanned; thousands of housing units, commercial buildings, and industrial facilities were demolished and replaced with new housing areas, transportation corridors, and public spaces [19].

Urban regeneration practices in Birmingham during the 1950s and 1960s were predominantly based on the slum clearance approach. This approach aimed at the complete removal of physically inadequate housing and the construction of new housing in accordance with modern standards. However, this process was criticized for leading to the displacement of large numbers of households and the fragmentation of social structures [20].

Launched in 1968, the second phase of urban regeneration programs was expanded to cover larger areas, with approximately 1,800 acres of land redeveloped. Policies implemented during this period prioritized quantitative housing production, and high-rise housing blocks were adopted as a rapid solution. Over time, criticism of these structures generated significant social and spatial problems, prompting a re-evaluation of prevailing transformation strategies.

In the early 1970s, a significant shift occurred in the direction of urban transformation policies in Birmingham. With changes in municipal administration, urban renewal programs that aimed to improve the existing building stock—while abandoning fully demolition-based approaches—came to the fore. This new approach sought to improve social conditions and protect local communities alongside physical interventions [21].

The Birmingham case clearly illustrates how housing policies and urban regeneration approaches in the UK evolved over time. Although the policies initially produced rapid and radical solutions, the long-term neglect of issues such as social integration and quality of life generated new challenges. In this respect, Birmingham represents an important reference for understanding the limits and shifting priorities of urban transformation in England [23].

Figure 3: Demolition sites and transient living conditions during the slum clearing process in Balsall Heath district, Birmingham (November 1967)



Source: Local archive photo.

Urban regeneration practices in Birmingham during the 1950s and 1960s were predominantly based on the slum clearance approach... However, this process was criticized for leading to the displacement of large numbers of households and the fragmentation of social structures.

4. Discussion: Benchmarking: France and England

Housing policies and urban transformation approaches implemented in France and England during the twentieth century were shaped by similar historical conditions but produced different institutional and spatial outcomes. In both countries, the physical destruction caused by industrialization, rural-to-urban migration, and wars transformed housing into a fundamental public issue requiring state intervention. However, the form, scope, and long-term effects of this intervention varied significantly between the two countries [2].

In France, housing policies were shaped within the framework of a centralized planning approach, particularly after the Second World War. The state directly guided housing production and played a decisive role in financing, design, and implementation processes. As observed in the case of Le Havre, the reconstruction process aimed not only to reduce the housing deficit but also to establish a new urban order based on modernist planning principles. This approach enabled the rapid production of a large number of housing units; however, it also generated criticism related to spatial uniformity and social segregation.

In the UK, housing policies were developed within a more fragmented institutional structure in which local governments assumed a stronger role. Although state intervention was institutionalized through the Housing Act of 1930 and the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, implementation was largely carried out by local authorities. As seen in the Birmingham case, urban transformation long focused on slum clearance and reconstruction, which resulted in social problems such as large-scale demolition and population displacement [24].

In both countries, criticism of housing policies intensified during the 1960s and 1970s, and the limitations of quantity-oriented approaches became increasingly evident. In France, these criticisms led to the reassessment of large public housing estates and the development of urban renewal policies. In the UK, economic crises and policy changes reduced the role of the state in housing provision and increased the dominance of the private sector [22].

From a comparative perspective, France's housing policies were implemented within a more holistic and centralized planning framework, whereas the UK adopted a model that produced more flexible but socially more fragile outcomes. Although both approaches addressed housing shortages, they also generated long-term challenges related to social integration, quality of life, and urban sustainability. This indicates that twentieth-century housing policies should be evaluated not only in terms of physical production processes but also in relation to their social consequences [20]. The main similarities and differences between housing policies and urban transformation approaches in France and England are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Benchmarking of Housing Policies and Urban Transformation in France and England

5. Conclusion

This study has examined housing policies and urban transformation processes in France and England during the twentieth century through a comparative framework. By analyzing the historical context, institutional structures, and planning approaches shaping housing production in both countries, the research has demonstrated that similar structural challenges generated markedly different spatial and social outcomes.

The findings indicate that France's centralized and state-led housing policies enabled rapid and large-scale housing production, particularly in the post-war period, but also produced long-term challenges related to spatial uniformity and social segregation. In contrast, the United Kingdom's more decentralized and locally driven approach allowed for greater institutional flexibility, yet often resulted in socially fragile outcomes, including population displacement and weakened community structures. The comparative analysis of Le Havre and Birmingham illustrates how governance models and planning instruments played a decisive role in shaping the spatial consequences of housing policies.

Overall, the study highlights that housing policies should not be evaluated solely on the basis of quantitative housing provision or physical transformation. Instead, their long-term social impacts, institutional contexts, and implications for quality of life must be considered as integral components of urban transformation. By providing a comparative perspective on twentieth-century housing policies in France and England, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between housing policy, planning practice, and social outcomes, and offers a historical reference for contemporary debates on urban regeneration and housing policy.

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