

Housing is more than Houses: Catherine Bauer and *Modern Housing*

Voice-over, Barbara Penner: I'm recording this today in Highpoint 1, which is a modernist block of flats here in London built by Berthold Lubetkin and opened in 1935. This was a year after Catherine Bauer published her seminal book, *Modern Housing*. So, it feels incredibly appropriate to be discussing Bauer and *Modern Housing* here at Highpoint 1, and the fact that the building has been happily occupied for 85 years really flies in the face of this still-pervasive truism that somehow, modern housing was always doomed to fail.

Catherine Bauer was the leading advocate for public housing in America between the 1930s and the 1960s. *Modern Housing* launched her career, and I've recently been lucky enough to be involved in its reprint. Bauer's book set out to introduce developments in European modern housing to American readers, and reading it today we're really reminded of what an incredible achievement European inter-war housing was. During this very brief window, 1919-1932, European govts built nearly 6 million units of workers' housing that rehoused 1/7th of their peoples. If we look at two early English garden cities, Letchworth and Welwyn, we see how Bauer was defining modern housing. 'Modern housing' for her was really never just about houses, it was about building whole communities from the ground up, including schools, shops, cafes, green spaces.

I think the problem is that when we look at garden cities today, it's very hard to see anything modern about them. I think for this reason, Bauer ultimately preferred developments in German housing, particularly housing estates designed by the architect Ernst May in Frankfurt. He was much more open to experimenting with new materials, with new construction techniques, standardization, pre-fabrication.

In order to provide modern housing, European governments had removed it from the free market and taken control of building themselves. They imposed very high construction standards, or they imposed rent controls for instance, which ensured that communities would be viable long term. Bauer knew, of course, that this kind of state intervention was anathema to Americans, but she also believed that with the Great Depression, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity had been created to intervene in the existing capitalist system. And in the wake of *Modern Housing*, Bauer herself would go on to co-author the first national housing legislation in the United States, the Housing Act of 1937. This was a central plank of Roosevelt's New Deal.

I think this is really crucial to understand: *Modern Housing* was never meant as some dry academic study, it was really meant to be a road map for reform and action, it was a very radical call to arms. I was attracted to Bauer because I find her mode of active scholarship really inspiring. She leapt into activism, labour organising, and campaigning. I think however, what really struck me was despite the fact that she's this obviously pivotal figure, she remains quite overlooked – and this is after 30 years of so-called 'herstory.' For me, this is why it was so important that *Modern Housing* was re-printed, it was really an opportunity not only to revisit this period when debates about housing were politically front and centre, but also to remember what a key role women played in these debates.