

Written for *The Listener*
by A.M.R.

word) many thousands more houses as a result.

The city is Stockholm. On statistics it is well housed—since there was precisely one “dwelling” to every three inhabitants when the war began. But most of these were very small houses or flats, building costs were double those of Britain, and rents were more than twice as high. It was as early as 1932 that the City Council looking about for means to build more houses at cheaper costs, hit on the idea of allowing home-seekers to invest labour instead of capital in their projected dwellings. For this is what the Stockholm scheme amounts to. For £15 cash (to meet legal costs) and approximately a thousand hours of labouring the Council will grant any able-bodied man the title to the house he works on and all the materials needed to build it. (The cost of these, of course, and of the section, he pays off in instalments in the usual way.)

Entire new suburbs have been set aside for the “self-erected” houses. By our standards they are small—only 700 square feet of floor-space—although, on the other hand, each has room for a workshop or garage, as well as the bathroom-washhouse and steam-heating plant, in the full-size basement which has to be built underneath as protection against Sweden’s almost arctic winter. Their appearance, too, is more uniform than suits us. For “self-erectors” may not follow their own plans but have to put up one or another of only seven standardised types; and these types are all permutations of one standard set of interior fittings (including stainless-steel kitchen bench!), prefabricated wall-sections, and pre-cut roof-frame. This standardising is intended not merely to reduce manufacturing cost. It is also aimed at simplifying construction to the point where an unskilled man, working in his spare time and with no more advice than a supervisor calling round once a fortnight can give, can do the job between winter and winter.

In the Spring

Here is how it happens. When spring comes with its northern rush the home-maker and his wife, move out from their city flat to tent for the summer on their selected section. He begins excavating at week-ends and after work each evening. She starts preparing the garden. He passes to boxing for concrete foundations and, when ready, rings up the municipal concrete mixer. This pours in the optimum quality of “mix” at maximum speed. By this time it is mid-summer, with daylight from two to eleven. Hercules must now work a 60-hour week at home on top of his 40 hours “at work,” erecting the wall-sections and bolting and hoisting the roof-trusses which, all cut ready to fit, the Council lorry drops on the section as he calls for them. For the whole interior must be standing within twelve more weeks, leaving only interior work for the months when after-tea daylight will have vanished. Even then, however, the home builder must not let up. All lining must be nailed up before winter comes, plumbing completed (by a

tradesman) and even windows made double as insulation against the intense cold.

Race Against Winter

Obviously “self-erecting,” as practised in Stockholm, is a far more strenuous business than it need be in New Zealand. For one thing no New Zealander need run such a marathon against winter, burdened (or spurred) by the certainty that if unfinished by June his house will be “finished” by snow before August. No New Zealand house would need such deeply-excavated foundations, or so large a basement, or such heavy roof timbering, or insulation between wall and lining. Moreover making things is right in the New Zealand tradition. Every New Zealand householder mends and extends without question things which most Europeans or Britons would—equally without question—call in a tradesman to attend to. In fact, plenty of men cooped into rented houses, without space for their families or hobby occupation for themselves, or else unable to “settle down” to factory or office work after service overseas, would find “building their own” a real “occupational therapy.”

Some Objections

Then can we take over and use this Swedish scheme in New Zealand? There are objections. One is that it might lead to jerry-built, amateurish semi-slums. Sweden has got over that by prefabricating or pre-cutting all skilled work and setting aside experts to advise and oversee the “self-erectors.” Another objection is that unskilled labour is less economical than skilled labour, so that, counting in the owner’s own work, these houses would actually be more expensive than others to build. This is true. But then the whole point of the scheme, from both national and personal angles, is that the owner’s labour is *not* counted in. It is his spare-time labour done with such good-will and hope of reward (i.e. in having “a place of one’s own” at the end of it) that it is more than half recreation. In any case it is only an extension of the work that tens of thousands of New Zealanders do every week in their own homes and gardens. If a Wellington hillside householder added all the hours he has spent in terracing, concreting, and shifting soil to the cost of his property, the Land Sales Court would probably have him certified insane.

Money No Real Obstacle

Finance is simple. Swedish figures are available but not very comparable since we want more and larger rooms in New Zealand, but a far less elaborate basement. The essential feature—that of a man paying his “deposit” in foot-pounds and not bank pounds—is clear, and as practicable alongside the Pacific as alongside the Baltic. To get materials would be to-day’s biggest difficulty. But that affects every building scheme alike.

In short I submit that Sweden’s experiment, which has proved itself under most adverse conditions, should at least be investigated in New Zealand. Economically it is promising, because we certainly have somehow to get more houses built faster. Sociologically it could turn out just as important, providing the personal and creative task that so many modern jobs do not give and developing that strain in the New Zealand character which makes us distinctive (and attractive) overseas and which may perhaps be clumsily described as “adaptability and initiative inside a collectivist set-up.”



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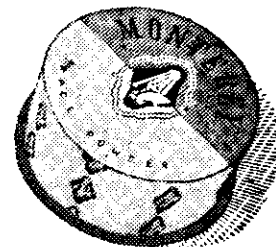
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