Buildings & Cities

Modern methods of construction and the future of housing

SPECIAL COLLECTION: MMC AND THE FUTURE OF HOUSING

EDITORIAL

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HIGHLIGHTS

Housing faces intersecting crises of affordability, supply and decarbonisation, and modern methods of construction (MMC) are increasingly promoted to transform both new build and retrofit. This editorial introduces a special issue that explores the political, social and cultural implications of MMC for housing. Seven articles apply critical social science perspectives to MMC housing in the UK, Germany, Estonia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Australia and the US. Moving beyond techno-optimistic and productivity-based narratives, the contributions examine policy roadmaps, political economy and multilevel governance aspects of systemic change, innovation systems and institutional readiness, systemic intermediaries, and residents' everyday experiences. Interrogating some of the claims made about the transformative potential of MMC, together they show that MMC offers tangible benefits, including speed, quality and reduced disruption, but that these are neither guaranteed nor evenly distributed. Its prospects depend less on technological innovation than on systemic coordination, stable long-term demand, place-based conditions and outcome-focused public policy. Future avenues for research are highlighted: comparative and longitudinal studies, whole-life verification of claimed benefits, greater attention to liveability and the experiences of residents and tenants, distributional and workforce effects, and the scaling of MMC in retrofit.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Housing now represents a grand societal challenge around the world, shaped by intersecting crises of affordability and a lack of adequate supply, alongside the pressing demands of decarbonisation. Over the coming decades, public and private sector actors will need to rethink established models of housing production if they are to meet the economic, environmental and social needs of the 21st century. Governments, consultancies and industry bodies have increasingly promoted modern methods of construction (MMC) as a means to fundamentally transform both the delivery of new homes and the retrofit of the existing housing stock (Brown *et al.* 2019; European Commission 2020; Farmer 2016; Housing Festival 2024; McKinsey & Co. 2017). MMC provides an alternative to traditional bricks-and-mortar housing construction by designing, planning and constructing prefabricated or pre-assembled products in offsite, controlled factory environments, and then assembling or installing them onsite.

The aim of this special issue is to broaden this discussion by examining the opportunities and challenges of MMC, and how it is reconfiguring contemporary housing systems. Its contributors use a critical social science lens to go beyond the economic and technological aspects of housing and examine the claims, processes, relations and dynamics, outcomes and potential concerns associated with MMC and related industrialised approaches. They draw upon diverse social science disciplines including geography, sociology, urban planning, business studies, political science, law, architecture, economics, and science and technology studies to challenge dominant techno-optimistic and productivity-based narratives. The authors engage with contemporary crises of housing supply, affordability and quality, environmental performance, liveability, and governance.

This editorial provides a brief introduction to MMC and housing and then summarises the seven articles comprising this special issue. MMC is likely to play an increasingly important role in the provision of new housing and the retrofit of existing housing in the coming decades. Consequently, the contributions in this special issue examine the political, social and cultural implications of this alternative form of housing design, production and retrofit.

2. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR MMC

The term 'modern methods of construction' (MMC) refers to a broad family of approaches, including factory-based manufacturing, digital and platform-based design, and process innovation, across both new-build housing and domestic retrofit. Whilst MMC is being developed in and applied to a range of construction sectors, this special issue adopts a focus on housing. Often used synonymously with prefabrication and offsite construction, the origins of MMC stretch back more than a century, and it is commonly negatively associated with a prominent period of rapid poorly performing construction in the post-Second World War era to address severe housing shortages in Europe (Iuorio *et al.* 2019). MMC is the term used by the UK government (MHCLG 2019); however, in international geographical contexts, 'industrialised construction' is the preferred name for the range of approaches that span modular to volumetric to panelised solutions, and that are connected through three common elements: (1) offsite lean manufacturing and assembly; (2) digital systems and robotics; and (3) a standardised 'kit of parts' approach (Macrorie 2026).

Today, MMC is being promoted by policy, industry and academic actors as an opportunity to upgrade the outdated housing construction sector by completely revamping design and production processes. The housing construction industry is increasingly portrayed as being archaic, suffering from a labour and skills deficit, and in need of widespread cultural change (for the UK context, see Farmer 2016; and DCLG 2017). The controlled factory environment of MMC and faster onsite construction times provide an opportunity not only to modernise the processes of residential construction and retrofit but also potentially to change workforce cultures, skills and competences, safety and inclusion levels (Construction Leadership Council 2023; Wallace *et al.* 2025). However, this requires significant capital investment in research and development (R&D), long-term development of factories, and supply chains and assured long-term pipelines of work.

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Proponents of MMC for housing highlight multiple potential benefits. First, MMC techniques are positioned to drive a step-change in the productivity levels of the housing construction industry (DCLG 2017; Housing Festival 2024; Mandala & Nayaka 2025). It is claimed that standardisation (*e.g.* through design codes or a 'kit of parts'), digitalisation, automation and efficiency drives can result in faster build times alongside parallel factory and site assembly, allowing for mass production at substantially lower costs (Bassi *et al.* 2021). Second, the factory environments and digital platforms of MMC allow for greater quality control. This includes addressing common defects, improving thermal performance, and reducing fire and safety concerns, and easier supervision of tasks (House of Lords 2018). Additionally, standardised and digitised MMC approaches are promoted as a route to accelerate the delivery of housing retrofit (Brown *et al.* 2019) and to address common retrofit concerns (*i.e.* delivering predicted energy savings and carbon reduction, and minimising damp and mould problems). Beyond increases in housing production and improved quality control, MMC housing construction is widely promoted as a sustainable, low-carbon, low-waste solution for new-build housing by optimising material use and building energy performance (Kamali & Hewage 2016; Tavares *et al.* 2021; Kedir & Hall 2021; O'Hegarty *et al.* 2025). Acknowledging diverse housing archetypes, the standardised, modularised approaches of MMC are framed as essential to achieve housing energy-efficiency retrofit at mass scale (Brown *et al.* 2019).

These potential benefits of MMC housing are logical and enticing but require scrutiny and verification to go beyond the rhetoric and examine what they mean in practice. The current status of MMC around the world is highly uneven, with countries such as Sweden and Japan having established business models and significant levels of investment (Steinhardt & Manley 2016; Yuill 2022), while other countries have limited examples, or have experienced repeated failures. An example of a laggard country is the UK where policymakers and the housing industry have invested significant time and funding to support the creation of a viable MMC industry, but have resulted in multiple modular housing providers entering administration or leaving the market (House of Lords 2024). There is much to be learnt from the successes and failures in these countries.

3. CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

There is a significant body of research on MMC, but it tends to be dominated by technical analyses and economic performance (Payne & Serin 2023; Sanchez-Garrido *et al.* 2023; Doan *et al.* 2025). A critical social science perspective adds much needed insights into the governance and organisational aspects of MMC approaches to housing design, construction and retrofit. This aligns with the call by Stuart Green to look beyond the productivity potential of MMC for housing (Green 2021, 2022) and examine the political, economic, social, environmental and planning arrangements that shape the uptake, processes and outcomes of this approach.

Two international academic workshops, panel debates, and site visits to debate and share insights on the social science challenges associated with 'Factory Homes' were convened in Nottingham, UK, and Lund, Sweden, in 2025. This formed the basis for the subsequent open call for papers for this special issue, which resulted in seven published articles (Table 1) that address the contemporary dynamics of MMC housing in a wide range of geographical contexts, across new-build and home energy retrofit, and at varying stages of delivery. Together, they reveal the alignments and frictions of attempts to innovate and upgrade housing delivery and renovation through MMC.

Goldman *et al.* focus on roadmaps as a policy instrument to promote MMC. Roadmaps are commonly used to delineate pathways to innovate the housing construction sector, but the visions promoted in these policies often fail to materialise in practice. The authors apply concepts from the policy implementation literature to analyse four roadmaps in the US, Malaysia and UK. They conclude that roadmaps are most effective when they support the coordination of the organisations engaged in MMC and provide concrete solutions that align with organisational mandates rather than promoting broader sectoral innovation. Roadmaps have the potential to be used strategically to embed MMC in existing housebuilding structures and practices.

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Macrorie takes a critical political economy perspective to examine why successive UK MMC housing drives since 2010 have failed and whether MMC can help close the social housing deficit. Drawing on documentary analysis, three factory visits, industry tradeshows and two international academic workshops, the author traces four phases of development and identifies good practice across five themes: policy, procurement, planning, platforms, and people and skills. Macrorie concludes that MMC's short-term contribution to much-needed social housing is likely to be modest. In the longer term, successful adoption will depend on stable public demand, land assembly and long-term funding rather than technological innovation. MMC changes how homes can be built, but not how many are supported through public policy and funding.

Morgan *et al.* also situate MMC in the housing and planning policy landscape of England. They present findings from a quantitative survey of 501 stakeholders and identify five key areas where MMC policy has the most influence: skilled labour, housing quality, supply chain stability, energy use, and health, safety and welfare. Using a network governance lens, they examine how these stakeholders engage in the delivery dynamics of MMC housing. They conclude that addressing the fragmented character of MMC delivery is key to realising broader adoption and uptake.

Dörr *et al.* highlight how the retrofit rate in the federal state of Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany, remains at approximately 1% per year and how this needs to at least double to meet regional targets for climate neutrality. Serial (prefabricated) retrofit and service platforms are being advocated as a potential means to unlock scale. Adopting a regional governance focus, they use the challenge-oriented regional innovation systems (CORIS) framework, supplemented by the social innovation concept of 'scaling up, out and deep' (Moore *et al.* 2015). Their Freiburg case study, which is based on 14 interviews and a workshop with intermediaries and practitioners, investigates how regional actors understand the potential for, limitations to and proposed solutions for greater uptake of serial retrofit. They identify how an early-stage, bottom-up reorientation pathway is emerging, and propose that a one-stop shop with case managers and data platforms could shift that pathway towards transformation.

Nguyen *et al.* provide insights into the current state of MMC in the Vietnamese housing market and conclude that precast building components are relatively easy to integrate into the existing system of housing construction. Meanwhile, more advanced prefabricated panels and volumetric products face multiple barriers including codes and regulations, cost estimates, quality assurance, supply chain coordination, and public confidence. They use institutional theory to develop an institutional readiness model to facilitate the adoption of these more advanced MMC products. While their model is customised to the Vietnamese context, the insights highlight the centrality of institutional parameters to establish MMC as a dominant approach to housing provision.

Pikas *et al.* focus on the trials and tribulations of installing prefabricated insulation elements in existing housing in Estonia. They highlight the importance of a government agency that functioned as a systemic intermediary to facilitate governance and procurement processes. While this helped to improve the uptake of MMC and satisfaction by residents, the retrofit programme faced challenges of demand uncertainty which made long-term investment difficult, and it also experienced longer-than-anticipated retrofit times. They conclude that systemic intermediaries provide essential coordination to support the long-term development of MMC industry.

Dorignon & Horne study the everyday experiences of dwelling in apartments that were produced using MMC. Their insights from interviews with residents and builders in Melbourne, Australia, foreground issues of comfort, maintenance and belonging that tend to be neglected in most studies of prefabricated housing. Their work emphasises design quality and the long-term implications for real-estate markets, affordability, location and neighbourhood characteristics, and associated infrastructure services. They conclude that MMC has multiple small and large impacts on the embeddedness of housing as a social construct.

AUTHORS	TITLE	DOI
R. Macrorie & A. Karvonen	Modern methods of construction (MMC) and the future of housing (Editorial)	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.961
G. Goldman, D. Sorokine, F. Suerich-Gulick, C. Carbone & M. Jemtrud	From strategy to delivery: a comparative analysis of MMC roadmaps	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.790
R. Macrorie	MMC and the social housing crisis: A political economy appraisal	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.802
J. Morgan, C. Goodier, R. Schmidt-III and K. Ayinla	MMC for housing: sectoral perception on governance challenges	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.791
H. Dörr, P. Späth & I. Goñi	Scaling up retrofit: regional challenges and opportunities for MMC	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.819
T. Q. Nguyen, B. N. Nguyen, T. H. Q. To & Z. Aziz	Institutional readiness for industrialised social housing in Vietnam	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.809
E. Pikas, K. Kuusk, P. Pihelo, R. Liias, J. Pukk & T. Kalamees	Prefabrication for housing retrofit: governance, innovation and resident experience	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.793
L. Dorignon & R. Horne	Inside offsite: everyday dwelling in factory-built apartments	https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.826

Table 1: Articles in this special issue, 'MMC and the Future of Housing', *Buildings & Cities* (2026), 7(1), guest editors Rachel Macrorie and Andrew Karvonen.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue suggest that MMC holds genuine potential for housing. Practitioners and residents report potential tangible benefits including: faster construction, higher build quality and improved carbon credentials through factory-based quality control, reduced disruption, particularly when delivery is well coordinated (Pikas *et al.*), and in retrofit where tenants can remain in place (Dörr *et al.*). They also point out the diversity of MMC types, which can be adopted, and how some MMC components, such as precast elements, can be relatively easily integrated into existing housing construction systems (Nguyen *et al.*). However, the research in this special issue also suggests that these benefits are neither guaranteed, automatic nor evenly distributed. The prospects for MMC in housing depend less on technological innovation than on the institutional, political and economic arrangements in which these approaches are embedded.

A recurring finding across different geographical contexts is the importance of systemic coordination and early engagement. This appears in policy roadmaps that align with organisational mandates (Goldman *et al.*), in systemic intermediaries (Pikas *et al.*), in one-stop shops and case managers (Dörr *et al.*), and in efforts to address fragmented delivery networks (Morgan *et al.*). Also critical is the need for stable, visible and long-term demand through consistent policy and funding frameworks. Whilst strategic roadmaps may exist, without pipeline visibility, manufacturers cannot justify investment in factories, skills and supply chains (Macrorie; Pikas *et al.*). Uptake is additionally shaped by place-based conditions, including regulatory and institutional readiness (Nguyen *et al.*), housing tenure and building stock, and regional industrial capabilities (Dörr *et al.*). For policymakers, this points to the state's role as funder, procurer, regulator and convenor in creating the conditions for MMC to develop. It does not mean mandating use of certain construction methods but instead setting clear outcome and value-based requirements (*e.g.* quality, carbon performance and social value) while allowing flexibility in how they are met (Macrorie).

Several important questions remain open. First, comparative and longitudinal research is needed to understand why MMC has become embedded in some national contexts, while repeatedly failing to become institutionalised in others. Second, the claimed benefits of MMC need independent, whole-life verification, covering quality, carbon, cost and durability. Residents and tenants remain largely absent from the MMC debate, yet their everyday experiences of comfort, maintenance and belonging are central to systemic change (Dorignon & Horne). Third, the distributional effects of MMC, including affordability, rent increases and equitable access, need further investigation. Fourth, the labour and skills implications of shifting construction work from site to factory, and combining

MMC with existing repair, maintenance and improvement trades, are not yet well understood. Finally, retrofit of existing homes is an emerging area where MMC approaches are only beginning to be tested at scale. Addressing these questions will require continued interdisciplinary dialogue between industry, policy decision-makers and academics (including from the social sciences), so that MMC contributes to housing that is not only faster and cheaper to build but also genuinely affordable, sustainable and liveable.

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AI DECLARATION

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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