The Legacy of Postwar Housing

An investigation into recent contention at Robin Hood Gardens

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Summary

In the following dissertation I am intending to investigate the recent controversy surrounding the demolition of the Robin Hood Gardens housing estate located in Poplar East London. The significance of this investigation stems from the importance of the architecture as the only built example of large scale housing by the Smithsons, whose design for the estate resulted from a significant intellectual period of ideological post-war thinking. It was during this time that architects including Alison and Peter Smithson were publishing a number of articles and built examples which aimed at rebuilding the nation with bold new ideological principles. The demolition of such a significant piece of polemical architecture and the political debate surrounding it therefore raises extremely interesting questions, centering around why such a significant building is due to be erased from our built architectural heritage.

The dissertation will begin with an investigation into the general circumstances surrounding social housing in the East End during the post-war period to see how housing policy and key demographic changes in society may have influenced the period leading up to the design of the estate. From here it will investigate the theoretical side of the Smithsons’ ideology, Team 10, the Independent group and a number of published articles/exhibitions in an attempt to investigate the major influences and theories that were translated into the design of Robin Hood Gardens.

From a detailed exploration of the design of the estate the dissertation will then investigate the arguments which are being presented for demolishing or saving the buildings along with the significance of the recently failed application to get Robin Hood Gardens Grade II listed. By looking at some other successfully listed examples of Post War housing, I will carefully consider the reasons given by English Heritage to deny Robin Hood Gardens protected status and examine these arguments and the response to the appeal by the Twentieth Century Society.

The dissertation aims to establish conclusions as to how the building has been managed and determine whether or not the justification for the demolition of Robin Hood Gardens is deserved when a possible alternative for renovation exists. By drawing on first hand information gathered from residents and the estate office, I will aim to determine if the architecture has, as some claim, failed through poor design or as others claim through poor policy.

Finally the dissertation aims to ask questions over the attitudes of conservation bodies toward highly controversial post-war modernist architecture. Combining my own opinions and first hand research from visiting Robin Hood Gardens, the conclusion of the dissertation will draw on the observations of the resident community, examining the disparities between pro and ante demolition parties and will attempt to formulate suggestions to the best possible future for the estate as a piece of architectural history and a prime example of post-war socialist architecture.
Huge demolition was caused from the widespread bombing of the East End during the Second World War.
Chapter One

Introduction: Post War Britain

To understand the Smithsons’ design of Robin Hood Gardens and their redirection of the modern movement in Britain, it is worth considering the circumstances that influenced not only the decisions for the estate but the entire period of their thinking. The twenty year period leading up to the construction of the estate saw, historically, some of the biggest changes in British society, highly influencing its housing policy. Resonating within the fabric of Robin Hood Gardens the aspirations of this generation can be nowhere better exemplified.

Following the end of the Second World War, Britain was faced with a number of difficulties focusing largely on the rebuilding of the nation. The war had delivered a colossal impact on home conditions and greatly reduced the housing stock. As in the case with the First World War, most building work had been halted together with the additional burden of rebuilding bombed cities: to which London and in particular the East End had been greatly targeted (Fig 1.1).

A housing crisis, similar to that of the 1930’s, was experienced which, according to the Survey of London, saw the conditions in which many families in the country were living become so bad that it was almost as if the earlier, interwar, public housing drive had never happened.1 In London alone, of the total stock of 98,000 homes, 89,000 were damaged and 2,500 were totally destroyed.2 The difficulties of the war were exacerbated by the beginnings of demobilisation, return of evacuated families, rise in marriage rate, and the influx of immigration to the area, all of which meant that more families were competing for fewer houses.3 In addition, the building work force had been halved during the war, and there was an enormous backlog of housing repair and maintenance work.4 Whilst much of the damaged existing terraced housing was removed, families were either forced to ‘double up’ or occupy temporary prefabricated huts that were quickly constructed on available land.

Despite these initial appalling conditions, the post-war period quickly developed into what can be seen to be one of the most prosperous periods of British history. Between 1945 and 1975, a boom in the economy enabled the British people to achieve higher living standards, better housing, better diet, better clothing, a greater time for leisure and more possessions than they ever had before. This improvement was most greatly marked in the working classes. People in clerical occupations, semi-skilled and unskilled workers saw dramatically increasing wages, rising far ahead of the relatively low rates of inflation.5

Reflected during these prosperous years was a revolutionary social shift in the aspirations and expectations toward housing and the types of estate that were being constructed. This became the emphasis of the Parker Morris Report in 1961, ‘Homes for Today and Tomorrow’.  

2 GLC, Home Sweet Home, 1976, p.44.
4 ‘Report of the Committee on Housing in Greater London’, 1965 (Cmd 2605) [the Milner Holland Report], p.11.
5 Burnett J. A Social History of Housing pp.280-282
‘It's a psychological fact pleasure helps your disposition’

Collage, 1948
Nigel Henderson

During the post-war years the kitchen was elevated in importance from the humble scullery to the centre of the household.

1950's advertisements for new time saving technologies became common place. With greater disposable income, these targeted the average family home not just the wealthy.
“An increasing proportion of people are coming to expect their home to do more than fulfil the basic requirements. It must be something of which they can be proud, and in which they must be able to express the fullness of their lives. There is, therefore, an increasingly prevalent atmosphere in which improvements in housing standards will be welcomed and indeed demanded, and in which stress will be laid upon quality rather than mere adequacy.”

The report was fundamental in that whilst recommending new standards for housing, it set out to relate these housing requirements to the shifting social and economic aspirations of a rapidly changing and ‘affluent’ society.

Two important major demographic changes were noted throughout the post-war period, which the design of newly constructed social housing estates including Robin Hood Gardens can be seen to reflect. First was the elevation of the kitchen, in status, from the humble scullery to the centre of the modern household, newly equipped with labour saving devices and furnished as a place where some, if not all, meals were expected to be eaten (Fig 1.2). The second was the increasing trend for married women to gain employment outside the home. Whilst widely common place today, this would have been highly unusual, prior to the war, even in working class homes.

The changes presented by a new modern society, especially the expectation of wives to both work and tend to the home, required a new emphasis on the requirement of time saving consumer appliances, such as automatic central heating, easily cleaned surfaces, washing machines and electric and gas ovens. Gradually an increase in wealth reached more and more families throughout the social scale. A house was no longer simply a place of shelter. It had developed into a location where you were expected to accumulate belongings, reflecting your wider social aspirations. Families had started spending more time enjoying life in their home and became expected to take a greater interest in looking after it. Standards of furnishing, fittings and decoration rose considerably throughout the two decades. Average working hours had fallen from fifty-three a week at the beginning of the century to forty-two in the 1960’s and by 1963, a television set was found in 82 percent of private homes, a vacuum cleaner in 72 percent, a washing machine in 45 percent and a refrigerator in 30 percent, increasing evidence of a growing trend of spending on the kitchen and living areas (Fig 1.3).

Despite the troubles that the war had produced, it created the perfect circumstances for architects, planners and councils to rethink the mistakes they had made in the past and re-develop the British cities in response to these new modern social aspirations. The 1930’s slum clearance terraces were increasingly coming under attack as mean and endlessly monotonous. Increasing in opinion was the notion that too much land was being over developed, with city life deteriorating into endless sprawling developments of semi-detached houses or slums.

Post War Britain was charged to break the mould and rethink its previous attitudes to the planning of its cities. Quality was to be all important and housing developments would reflect the needs of different social groups with a strong push towards the equalisation of conditions. The desire for a new start was married with the clean-sweep of ideas provided by the modern movement taking place in continental Europe, which provided the catalyst for a new generation of architects, policies and social change which would

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6 ‘Homes for Today and Tomorrow’ (Department of the Environment, 1961) pp. 1-2
7 Burnett J. A Social History of Housing, pp. 280-1
8 Burnett J. A Social History of Housing, p.283
9 Power A. Hovels to High Rise, p.187
ultimately contribute to the creation of Robin Hood Gardens itself and the widespread adoption of the ‘age of machine living’ to become firmly rooted within British architectural discourse.

**National Housing Policy, London and The East End 1945 – 1965**

Social Housing Policy throughout the post-war years was particularly dependent on the views of the responsible local authorities. With the East End traditionally being the working class hub of London it is of no surprise that social housing estates were plentiful. Robin Hood Gardens can be seen to have been affected by a number of key policies throughout the post-war period which is reflected throughout its design.

In 1945, a Labour Government was elected on the promise that the people’s welfare would come first, needing no persuasion that it would have to play a major part in building new homes. The Government’s determination to do both more and better than had been achieved after 1918 is evident in many aspects of social policy. With competing claims of industrial reconstruction, nationalisation, the welfare state programmes and shortages of materials the problem of housing was not going to be straightforward. For the first 10 years or so house building was to be for ‘general needs’ with the Government identifying Local Authorities as a key component to their campaign. Already having extensive planning powers and a major role in public health, the greatest strength of the Local Authorities lay in the ability to enforce closing and compulsory purchase orders on private landlords.

In Poplar the primary goal after the war was to rehouse the homeless following the extensive bombing which had taken place. The local authority ‘Poplar Borough Council’ assumed full responsibility for the repair-work on war-damaged properties although it quickly realised that existing housing would only be able to contribute in small amounts towards the overwhelming shortage.

The Housing Act of 1944 provided £150 million to be made available nationally for prefabricated dwellings, with Poplar Borough Council applying initially for 2000 dwellings. Intended as a temporary measure, prefabricated huts were the first initiative. The shells of the huts, complete with a roof, could be constructed within a day and a half with provision for occupation being made within a week but they consisted of the most simple and basic accommodation available. In December 1944 the vicar of Christ Church, Cubitt Town correctly predicted:

> "These huts are only temporary but there will be the temptation to allow their continuance far beyond the three or four years prescribed"\(^{10}\)

The huts quickly became an embarrassment with many existing up until 1958.\(^{11}\) Combined with the huts, the borough also received a preliminary allocation for 1000 prefabricated bungalows. It was agreed that any site which could contain two or more prefabs might be used resulting in most available space being allocated for this temporary solution. By December 1947, 942 prefabs had been provided throughout the borough, 541 controlled by the Borough Council and 401 by the London County Council. The prefabs unlike the huts proved popular with tenants largely because of their modern amenities (most even being equipped with refrigerators) but were also only intended to last about ten years. By 1965, 323 still remained, far outlasting their agreed duration. They soon presented a new

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10 Church Times, 8 Dec 1944, p.661.
Urban Re-Identification
A + P Smithson 1952

Lost Farmland, Stevenage

Urban Sprawl was increasingly being seen as a problem. Development was seen to be destroying vast portions of the countryside.
problem to the borough, one that was significant with regard to Robin Hood Gardens.

By 1950, a national building boom was well underway with 900,000 homes having been constructed under the Labour Government. In Poplar however, excluding the prefabricated huts and bungalows, very little else had been built. This can be attributed to three main problems: There was an increasingly serious national economic crisis resulting directly from the war which had forced the Government to cut back on its house-building programme, frequent shortages in construction materials, notably softwood, cement and bricks, but most importantly, there was a significant shortage of suitable sites, the vast majority having been extensively developed as part of the temporary housing drive, which was making the creation of more permanent housing more difficult.12

The limited patchwork of bombed sites remaining resulted with some of the most unappealing and unsuitable sites being put forward for development, a problem which extended well into the late 1960’s when Robin Hood Gardens was constructed on the isolated, noisy site sandwiched between the busy East India Dock highway and Blackwall tunnel. Explored in subsequent chapters, these difficult site constraints can be seen to govern the driving factor behind a number of key considerations for the schemes design.

It was not until the early 1950’s that the borough of Poplar became part of a giant transformation to regenerate the city of London and in particular the East End. Inspired by the County of London Plan of 1943 and the Greater London Plan of 1944, a wholesale clearing of inner city sites, for massive high density rebuilding began. This initiative combined with planned new satellite towns, direct descendants of garden cities, combined newly implemented green belt policy in order to protect land from what was seen as a growing anxiety surrounding the sprawl of cities (Fig 1.4). According to the plan, replacing and rebuilding the over-crowded slums to acceptable modern standards required both the new towns and high density flats on inner city sites. The 1943 plan identified the East End as a major area which needed redevelopment with the main problem being the surplus of ‘depressed, drab and dreary housing’.13

“The decentralisation area [including Poplar] comprises those parts of London which, because of obsolescence, congestion, bomb damage and lack of repairs, are considered to be ready for comprehensive redevelopment. Even though there may be in these areas a number of dwellings which are not yet sufficiently decayed as to appear to warrant immediate demolition, we consider it would be wrong from social, practical, and economic points of view, to redevelop obsolete areas in any way other than comprehensively. The retention of a relatively small number of dwellings – excepting perhaps as temporary quarters during the transitional stage while rebuilding takes place – because they have not reached acute slum condition, would obstruct proper and economic redevelopment of the whole district, and would tend to lessen the advantages and amenities of the new dwellings.”14

In 1956, a major new nationwide slum clearance and demolition programme was announced, fitting neatly with both the political commitment to rebuild, and the post-war preference for ‘machine living’. Increasingly, sites were obtained using the local authorities’ compulsory purchase powers, which proved unpopular with displaced residents. Modern pressure from changing lifestyles, demographic requirements for a

13 J.H.Forsah and Patrick Abercrombie. ‘County of London Plan’, 1943, p.4
14 Ibid. p.83.
"Transforming multi storey housing"

Graph sourced from Burnett J - 'A Social History of Housing.'

Local Authority dwellings approved for construction by building type.
greater proportion of one and two-bedroom accommodation units, increasing emphasis on inner-city slum clearance and the shortage of possible sites all culminated in the passing of one of the most important policies to be introduced. For the first time, new subsidy arrangements allowed grants to be increased per floor for blocks of over six storeys encouraging housing authorities to build tall (Fig 1.5). This was further accelerated by architects and planners who, influenced by Le Corbusier, believed that high-rise blocks would replace resource-inefficient horizontal terraces.

Throughout Britain, political propaganda and persuasive advertising meant that new high-rise estates were initially welcomed by both tenants and councils. With many residents having been moved from the cramped, insanitary conditions of the slums, it is easy to see how the opportunity to have a home with modern amenities such as internal toilets and central heating may have influenced their association of the benefits of high-rise development with higher standards of living regardless to the buildings height. Local authorities, combining the new economic benefits for building tall and the ability to take advantage of industrialised building methods, largely embraced this form of development as an inescapable solution of avoiding the problems of ‘decanting’ and ‘overspill’ whilst enabling more affordable housing at much higher densities.

It is therefore interesting to note that in contrast to this common consensus, Poplar Borough Council remained greatly opposed to high-rise development throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s maintaining that such developments were insensitive to their surroundings, unsuitable for families and highly unpopular with local people. In response, Poplar Borough Council restricted the building of their own flats to a limit of four storeys, whilst the LCC, championing the positive views of high rise flats expressed in the County of London Plan, continued to include tall blocks throughout the borough within its mixed developments. Recommended by the Health Minister, Aneurin Bevin, these developments aimed at recreating a mixed community and traditional village atmosphere where ‘the doctor, grocer, butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street’. This had the intention of appealing to people of all social classes although in reality council built estates tended to remain almost wholly working class with local employment concentrated on the nearby railways and docks.

By the 1960’s it was becoming clear that a new housing crisis was looming. Much publicity was given to the growing problem of homelessness, the increased scarcity of rented accommodation and the insecurity of tenants in London. Behind the ‘affluent society’ their still lay remained a great deal of private squalor in the housing of lower-paid workers, immigrant groups, the elderly and those unable to have been in a position to press their claims on national prosperity. In 1961 the Conservative Government brought back a ‘general needs’ subsidy and further pressure was exerted by the government on local authorities to build high blocks of flats and embrace the industrialized building systems then being developed. With the Parker Morris Report calling for better space standards in individual dwellings, the need to increase densities on sites was specified and high-rise developments were further encouraged.

Despite the new grants and continued pressure to build tall blocks, a growing criticism...
Collapse at Ronan Point, 1968.
Newham - East London

A gas explosion killing four people and injuring seventeen raised questions over the safety of high rise developments.
surrounding them had become apparent throughout the early sixties. The architectural profession, which had been among the strongest advocates of high-rise now increasingly spoke out against it, criticising the ways in which it was being used, especially when occupied by families. This coincided with doubts that there were really any significant savings in land or in building costs. An increasingly negative public opinion toward high-rise development was consolidated shortly after in 1968 with the structural failure of Ronan Point, a 23 storey tower block located in Newham, East London (Fig 1.6). A gas explosion led to a partial collapse of the building in which four people were killed and seventeen injured. Public confidence in the safety of residential tower blocks was shaken and the local authority preference for building tall social housing blocks never regained popularity (Fig 1.5).

The original planning papers put forward by the LCC for Robin Hood Gardens in 1965 requested the acquisition of a number of properties in the area by compulsory purchase, stating a proposal of three 16 storey tower blocks, five 4 storey maisonettes and three 2 storey blocks of old peoples flats. This design was never to be built. In April 1965, the LCC was succeeded by the Greater London Council (GLC) as part of London Governments Act of 1963, introduced in order to reorganise local government in the capital. The Metropolitan Borough of Poplar was combined with the boroughs of Bethnal Green and Stepney to form the currently existing, much larger, London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The GLC became responsible for overseeing the completion of Robin Hood Gardens and it was by them that two highly influential young architects; Alison and Peter Smithson, were appointed to deliver a design for what had become one of the most comprehensive, yet problematic sites available within the borough.

With the decreasing incentive to build tall and the removal of additional subsidies, it is surely of no coincidence that by 1967, the Smithsons’ proposal to realise a lower design reminiscent of their earlier unbuilt Golden Lane scheme (1952) would prove a more viable and attractive solution to a borough which had never really favoured such tall buildings in the first place. Robin Hood Gardens meanwhile provided a long overdue opportunity for the couple to realise a design which they had already spent nearly two decades in perfecting.

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20 GLC Planning and Communications Committee Papers Jan – Mar 1965
CIAM Grille

‘Re-identification’ of the city into House, Street, District and City

Importance was placed on identity and human associations of the city elements as opposed to functional organisations such as dwelling, work, circulation, and recreation.
Chapter Two

The Smithsons and Team 10

Throughout the post-war period, Alison and Peter Smithson, architects of Robin Hood Gardens, gained immense notoriety for their polemical writings and competition entries encompassing bold new ideological principles which were largely intended to transform and reinvent the widely accepted modernist theories on urbanism of the time. These included the teachings of Le Corbusier and the principles highlighted in the 1933 Charte d’Athènes.

In 1951 a resurgence in consumer production and cultural activities was celebrated at the Festival of Britain, a national fair on the South Bank of London whose theme was one hundred years of British achievement. As part of the Festival of Britain, the Live Architecture Exhibition took place at the newly built Lansbury Estate in Poplar, which focussed on increasing public interest in the disciplines of architecture and town planning. Attendances were disappointing with only 86,426 people visiting, compared to 8 million who visited the South Bank exhibition. This poor reaction was reflected within an emerging generation of artists, architects and critics who were growing extremely critical of what they viewed was an increasingly dull, watered down, domesticated version of modern life which was being exhibited.

The formation of Team 10 at the 9th meeting of the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in 1953 was an attempt to create a small forum of like-minded architects from across Western Europe to express and resolve their deep dissatisfaction with the current paradigms of modern architecture. Rather than be seen as an elitist group, they preferred the notion of being a discussion group, meeting regularly and discussing their various ideas, allowing for the development of their individual thought processes. Taking action against traditional Corbusian teachings, the group recommended a move away from utopian functionalism, towards a revitalisation of perspective and a sense of belonging, more common to what was being taught in the social sciences than in architecture at the time. A new emphasis was to be placed upon “identity”, “association” and “neighbourliness”.

In 1953, during the 9th meeting of CIAM in Aix-en-Provence, the Smithsons’ presented their CIAM grille (Fig 2.1) along with the theoretical text ‘Urban Reidentification’, that would provide the bulk of the theory behind Robin Hood Gardens. In their presentation the couple challenged the existing Charte d’Athènes (CIAM IV 1933), a 95-point programme used for the planning and construction of rational cities which had been the focus of the previous CIAM meeting that had taken place in England. The work demonstrated a radical shift of emphasis in which importance was placed on identity and human associations as opposed to the functional organisation which the original Charte d’Athènes had defined. The categories of Dwelling, Work, Recreation and Circulation were ‘re-identified’ according to a hierarchy of perceived association: The House, The Street, The District and The City. This highlighted an increased requirement throughout the hierarchy for “identity” (Fig 2.2).

“Man may readily identify himself with his own hearth, but not easily with the town

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23 Architecture d’aujourd’hui, 177 Jan-Feb, p 4-5
24 Architecture d’aujourd’hui, 177 Jan-Feb, p 4-5
(Fig 2.2)

‘Hierarchy of Association’
Urban Re-identification, 1953
Alison And Peter Smithson

An early diagram charting the relationship of how an individual associates himself to the city and its inhabitants
The hierarchy was intended to aid the creation of a greater communal life, in direct opposition to the arbitrary isolation of the types of community proposed by Le Corbusier in his recently completed Unité d’Habitation in Marseille. The new hierarchy was denoted as follows:

1) The House - There should be a basic programme for the dwelling in terms of the activities of the home.

2) The Street - To be considered as the first point of contact outside the dwelling. Where children first learn about the world; essential adult everyday activities: shopping, making repairs, posting letters, cleaning the car, walking the dog

3) The District - Outside the street people are in direct contact with the larger range of activities, which give identity to the community. Free choice is essential.

4) The City - Districts in association generate the need for a richer scale of activities, which in their turn give identity to the ultimate community.

The Smithsons argued that social cohesion could only be achieved by increasing density as the total population increased and by ensuring an ease of movement throughout all four levels of association. This was to be made possible by their first reference to elevated ‘streets-in-the-air’, a concept with which the couple would become synonymous. Explained at a greater depth in a subsequent chapter, the “streets-in-the-air” were to provide the necessary flexible connections from the housing to the ground and to places of work, with the concept subsequently influencing their own personal design at Robin Hood Gardens and those of many other post-war housing estates throughout the country.

Team 10 continued to influence modern architecture and served as the platform on which the Smithsons promoted their ideas, whilst enabling all of its members a voice by which to gain notoriety. Following the presentation of the 9th meeting of CIAM and the completion of the couple’s Hunstanton school scheme in 1954, the Smithsons were heralded as:

‘The bright young hopes of the profession’.27

Their ideas on community, neighbourliness and community interaction became highly influential within post-war housing. It is through the interaction of a second group and in particular the work of photographer, Nigel Henderson, who supplied the images for their 1953 CIAM Grille, that we can determine where the influences of the Smithsons’ attitudes regarding social cohesion developed. These attitudes would form the basis of a new style of modernism which Robin Hood Gardens exemplifies.

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25 Alloway L. The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the aesthetics of Plenty, p50
26 Smithson A. The Emergence of Team 10 out of C.I.A.M, p7
27 Architects Journal, 21st Jan 1954
Children playing in the streets of Bethnal Green. Henderson’s photographs were of great interest to the Smithsons in their understanding of community and association.
The Independent Group and The New Brutalism

During the early 1950’s the Smithsons became associated with a second collection of people known as the Independent Group, based around the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. This group included fifteen artists, architects and intellectuals who frequented the ICA as part of an elite discussion group which sought to link art and architecture.

The Independent group brought together Richard Hamilton, Nigel Henderson, James Stirling, Alison and Peter Smithson, Reyner Banham, Toni del Renzio, Laurence Alloway, Magda Cordell, Frank Cordell, John Holroyd and Colin St. John Wilson at its core. The art critic, Laurence Alloway, recalled the atmosphere within the Group’s discussions:

“We felt none of the dislike of contemporary culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as a fact, discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically… Hollywood, Detroit and Madison Avenue were, in terms of our interests, producing the best of popular culture… We assumed an anthropological definition of culture in which all types of human activity were the subject of aesthetic judgment and attention.”

The Independent Group, meeting between 1952 and 1955 became highly influential regarding the beginnings of the pop art movement. The influence of the group on the design of Robin Hood Gardens is significant when considering the relationships of the Smithsons both with Reyner Banham and Nigel Henderson. It was with the Independent group that the Smithsons coined the concept of the New Brutalism, the style in which Robin Hood Gardens was constructed, with Banham becoming its greatest advocate. Essentially the Smithsons were against people discussing Brutalism as a style, something they could not see eye to eye on with Banham;

‘Up until now Brutalism has been discussed stylistically, whereas its essence is ethical’.

They argued that Brutalism:

“was an attempt to be objective about ‘reality’ – the cultural objectives of facing up to a mass produced society, whilst dragging a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful sources at work.”

As a style the term Brutalism was first used to describe the couple’s unbuilt Soho House project in the December 1953 issue of Architectural Design:

“It was decided to have no finishes at all internally, the building being a combination of shelter and environment. Bare brick, concrete and wood… Had this been built it would have been the first exponent of the New Brutalism in England.”

These decisions to leave building material, structure and services left ‘as found’ became stylistically interwoven with Brutalism. It was in this state that the Smithsons believed truly neutral spaces were created, ready to be filled with occupants’ possessions, creating the much-needed ‘identity’ that society required.

Having met Nigel Henderson, the Smithsons became interested in the work of Henderson’s wife Judith, herself a social-anthropologist. They often visited them at their home in

28 Alloway L. The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the aesthetics of Plenty, Foreword
Parallel of Life and Art

No hierarchy was given to the display of the images presenting the importance of the ‘whole’.

(Fig 2.4)

Parallel of Life and Art

‘100 of the first Brutalist images’

The range of imagery highlighted new technological advancement in photography.

(Fig 2.5)
Bethnal Green, the setting of the photographs taken for the CIAM Grille, allowing the Smithsons a first hand insight into the social patterns and complex relationships in an East-End community. It is here that the Smithsons discovered their “as found aesthetic”, viewing children’s pavement play-graphics, items of detritus on bombed sites and repetition of ‘kind’ such as the doors used in site hoardings. They were concerned with how they could re-energise the existing fabric in a post-war society, which seemingly had nothing. It was in particular the observation of the role of the ‘neighbours’ which most interested the Smithsons. This was the subject of a course conducted by Judith herself. Talking to Judith about her work, the couple identified one of the most significant concepts lacking in the whole New Town philosophy to be:

“*The close relationships of people to each other and to the environment*”

The work of Nigel Henderson and in particular his ‘typical’ street scenes of Bethnal Green (Fig 2.3), continued to be of great interest to the Smithsons contributing further to their consideration of ‘association’ and ‘identity’. Combined with the notion of neighbourliness, these ideas would provide the main driving force behind the couple’s decisions for the provision of street decks at Robin Hood Gardens. Here it was hoped that through architectural implementation, the street-life, social cohesion and community scenes of Bethnal Green could be transferred into their modern utopian vision of how future generations would successfully live.

As a precursor to the Brutalist movement in Architecture, the Smithson collaboration with other Independent Group members Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi at the ‘*Parallel of Life and Art*’ (1953) and ‘*This is Tomorrow*’ (1956) exhibitions which formed the platform where the philosophy of the movement can first be seen expressed.

**Parallel of Life and Art (1953)**

The Parallel of Life and Art exhibition took place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1953. Contributions were made by Henderson, Paolozzi and the Smithsons, consisting of a series of annotated photographs taken from a variety of different sources, including newspapers, magazines and journals. Many images offered “scenes of violence and distorted or anti-aesthetic views of the human figure… all had a coarse grainy texture which was clearly regarded by the collaborators as one of their main virtues”.

The concept of the exhibition was simply for all four contributors to find some common ground. Reyner Banham later referred to the exhibition as being a collection of the first 100 Brutalist images.

What made the exhibition unique was the unconventional and seemingly chaotic manner in which the work was displayed. Pieces were leant against walls and suspended from wire above the heads of people. This was justified by the functional requirement for the exhibition room to remain clear for lecturing whilst the exhibition was open, as well as to create a non-hierarchal organisation of the work presenting it as a ‘whole’ which emphasised individual subject matter (Fig 2.4).

The unconventional style of display and the strange imagery portrayed resulted in a series of poor reviews with critics complaining of “the deliberate flouting of the traditional concepts of photographic beauty, of a cult of ugliness and denying the spirit

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31 Alloway L. *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the aesthetics of Plenty*, p.201
33 Architecture Culture 1943–1968. 2nd edition p.265
This is Tomorrow exhibition catalogue

Peter Smithson
Eduardo Paolozzi
Alison Smithson
Nigel Henderson

(Fig 2.6)

This is Tomorrow exhibition catalogue

Plan of Patio and Pavilion installation

(Fig 2.7)
of man.”  

The imagery shown consisted largely of photographs, which explored new ways in which the camera could perceive things which the human eye could not. Included were photographs incorporating microscopy, anatomy and extreme range astronomy (Fig 2.5). As the four contributors (Henderson, Paolozzi and the Smithsons) were all recognised as central members of the Independent group, aspects of the show became interwoven to define their general principles; breaking down the boundaries between disciplines and the juxtaposition of the imagery, in denying any importance of one thing over another. Whilst some saw this as extraordinary, the collaborators saw it simply as a consequence of trying to record as much of what was around at the time in a way that was not biased to any particular piece.

Attitudes of the four collaborators demonstrated at the exhibition can be seen to continue throughout the work of the Smithsons. Most notably reflected in a parallel between the exhibition and their later work is the continued belief in the importance of utilising the latest modern technologies. The Smithsons believed that the continual production of a noteworthy architecture required an awareness and employment of these most forefront technologies in order to respond to the different circumstances of the age, which the architecture is created. As they saw it, the reproduction of past paradigms was no longer valid;

“No other men have succeeded like Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe in building complete systems. Their concentration is such that the nature of their systems is implicit even in the fragment… And, what validates both their systems is that they are conceived in the terms of the technology of their time and that both men have a capacity for rejection and reconsideration in the face of changing circumstances.”

Accompanying the exhibition was a series of texts, one of which was a manifesto documenting the aims of what they believed was the opening phase of a new movement;

“The first great creative period of modern architecture finished in 1929 and work subsequent to this can be regarded as exploratory work for the second great creative period beginning now.”

It is at the Parallel of Life and Art where we can first witness the beginning of the Brutalist ethic. The show was intended to “show not so much the appearance as the principle – the reality beneath the appearance.” As Reyner Banham comments:

“The tone of response to the New Brutalism, existed even before hostile critics knew what to call it.”

The Parallel of life and Art exhibition highlighted a new direction that the Smithsons were undertaking. The anonymity presented by the non-hierarchical display of the exhibition subject matter would be translated into the couple’s search for building forms that would reflect their new non-demonstrative society.

36 Architects Journal ‘Steam photography’ September 24 1953, p.365
37 Smithson A & P. (1959) Team 10 Primer, p.34
38 Ibid, p.37
Patio and Pavilion

The timber frame was crudely constructed and the roof made of clear corrugated plastic.

It was intended that the simplified shelter would highlight the importance of the objects and a user-created identity.

Patio and Pavilion

View at the side of the shed highlighting the aluminium covered walls and artefacts.
This is Tomorrow Exhibition (1956)

Following the Parallel of Life and Art exhibition, the precursor for the Smithsons’ attitudes toward housing was exemplified in their contribution to the ‘This is Tomorrow’ exhibition, which opened on August 1956, at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. The exhibition was another attempt to showcase the collaboration of architects, sculptors and artists with it initially undergoing difficult planning issues, due to a disagreement between participants as to what style the exhibition should take. As a result it took nearly two years before it was finally held. No resolution was made on the overall form of the exhibition, with the final decision being that the space in the Whitechapel Gallery would be divided into ‘market like stalls’ which would allow each party to display their work encompassing their individual interests and beliefs.40 The result was an exhibition consisting of twelve such groups, (each comprising an architect, painter and sculptor) producing varying themes from one another, with no overall unifying manifesto.

The Smithsons combined, once again, with Henderson and Paolozzi for their exhibit, consisting of a piece they named ‘Patio and Pavilion’ (Fig 2.7). This essentially was a framework designed by the Smithsons, filled with objects and imagery provided by Henderson and Paolozzi (Fig 2.8). The design was inspired by Henderson’s backyard in Bethnal Green, deliberately representing a garden shed. The structure was crudely built of timber, with a corrugated plastic roof, through which objects laid on top could be seen. The internal walls of the pavilion were made of aluminium covered plywood, in order to reflect light and include every visitor as an inhabitant (Fig 2.9). The floor of the patio was covered with sand and left to be inhabited by sculptures, bricks, stones and other artefacts. Shortly after completing the pavilion the Smithsons left for the tenth CIAM congress in Dubrovnik, leaving the finishing of the exhibit up to Henderson and Paolozzi.

The exhibit was not a stylistic piece, rather a more deliberate statement regarding occupancy and territory; which the Smithsons’ coined the “art of inhabitation”, reflecting the social patterns of dwelling in the early 1950’s. The aims were for the pavilion to emphasise what they felt were basic human requirements – space, shelter and privacy with the range of objects symbolising the great range of human activity.

“A view of the sky, a piece of ground, privacy, the presence of nature and of animals when we need them…and allow the basic human urges – to extend, and control, to move.”41

The flexibility in constructing a representative space that catered for all aspects of the modern world was their solution to what the group saw as the new contemporary culture of the ‘affluence’ of consumerism. The exhibition quickly became a huge success with almost a thousand people per day coming to see it. The exhibits highlighted the view of a changing society long before the Parker Morris Report of 1961 brought it to the attention of Government. Richard Hamilton’s piece ‘Just what it is that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing’ (Fig 2.10) became widely accepted as a primary example of the pop art movement, depicting a similar scene to the patio and pavilion, with a basic room filled with modern paraphernalia. The Smithsons’ stated at the time:

“The architect’s work of providing a context for the individual to realise himself in and the artist’s work of giving signs and images to the stages of this realisation, meet in a single act, full of those inconsistencies and apparent irrelevancies of every moment, but

40 Alloway L. The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the aesthetics of Plenty, p.135
41 Smithson A, P. Changing the Art of Inhabitation, p.109
Hung from the roof are hundreds of collected chandeliers masking the Smithsons’ architecture.

‘Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?’
Collage on paper, 1958
Richard Hamilton
The Patio and Pavilion exhibition encompassed the true Brutalist principles, a simplified aesthetic that would achieve a beauty in the flexibility of a user-created identity. It was not calling for an aesthetic so to speak but rather a gentle redefining of the role of an architect, as required by a modern society. The Smithsons felt that it was their role to provide the basic framework (such as the crude timber construction of the pavilion) which would achieve the fundamental basic requirements of space, shelter and privacy whilst allowing for the complete freedom for occupancy (as dictated at the artists discretion). Smithson later wrote:

"...the ideal home is that, which one can make their own without altering anything."[43]

The removal of unnecessary decorative features, became a precursor of the Brutalist aesthetic, encompassing a simplified frame which enabled maximum expression in the creation of an individual’s home. The Smithsons’ early departure from the exhibition after completing their pavilion perhaps highlights an interesting metaphor for the lack of control an architect has in the application of space once his part in the building process has been completed. After their pavilion was completed, it was surely right that they had no influence on what was displayed inside it.

Robin Hood Gardens can be seen to successfully translate the aspirations witnessed at ‘Patio and Pavilion’ into the types of homes the Smithsons were aiming at creating for a new modern society. Whilst the estate blocks (the pavilion) are very much the result of an overall simplified framework, emphasising no hierarchical importance, the individual apartment cells (the sculptures, artefacts and relics) provide locations for the expression of occupant free will. Having visited a number of these flats, the translation of ideas into the provision of spaces for individual expression is highly noticeable. In many homes, intense, individual personalisation is evident (Fig 2.11), provided by a location that:

‘it all can happen.’[44]

Often the Smithsons’ architecture is entirely lost behind pictures, paintings, artefacts and belongings. Regardless of what has been criticised since the estate’s completion, had the residents of Robin Hood Gardens themselves wanted to pay homage to the architects’ celebration of the art of inhabitation they could have done no better.

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[43] Smithson A & P. *Changing the Art of Inhabitation*, p.126
[44] Ibid. p.126
“Since 1953, Aix-en-Provence, 9th Congress of CIAM, July 1953, Europe has accomplished a change of life-style: its symbol is the motor-car. The streets of the big cities and towns are pretty with ordinary girls going to ordinary jobs. Light colours on the inside of ordinary houses are now quite normal. Television has opened people’s minds and made a new class conscious of its existence as a group with a need for a lifestyle of its own. We as architects have still not found a built mode appropriate to this life-style – we have not yet built the places ‘where it can all happen’. Our housing especially is rigid and unfriendly.”


“In a roundabout way one has arrived at a certain conclusion concerning repetition and number – what we were all worrying about CIAM 9 at Aix-en-Provence in 1953. At the time it seemed to be one of the most important things discussed there, but all subsequent exploration of number patterns and size of social groupings seemed to get nowhere. Suddenly it would seem that one of the things that is crucial to large numbers and to repetition is a special sort of anonymity of styling – a conclusion no-one would have dared even think about in 1953 – and this is an important realisation."

Smithson A, P, Changing the Art of Inhabitation, p124
Basic Diagram highlighting ‘streets-in-the-air concept’.

Residential units occupying the space in between the raised streets.

Gold Lane deck study

Four deck version. Section highlighting access above and below deck level. Varied uses of Yard Gardens illustrated.

Golden Lane street-deck perspective

A + P Smithson, 1952
Chapter Three

Golden Lane Competition Proposal (1952)

Whilst the exhibitions produced as part of the Independent Group had begun to demonstrate the Smithsons’ attitudes toward the human requirements of the individual house, it was the couple’s urban proposal for Golden Lane which gained them their widest acclaim. Submitted along with their CIAM Grille and the theoretical text “Urban Re-identification” during CIAM 9, the competition scheme for Golden Lane would form the basis of what the Smithsons viewed as a suitable model for mass housing at the urban scale for ‘the modern society’. It would become their tour-de-force highly influencing a number of social housing estates developed in the UK throughout the 50’s and 60’s and the model for their own lone realisation of mass housing at Robin Hood Gardens.

The couple’s observations of street life at Bethnal Green exposed a multiple range of human, community and urban activities that they felt were lacking from the traditional mass housing models of the time. Their proposal at Golden Lane was aimed at refining Le Corbusier’s urban model, Ville Radieuse, which they perceived as no longer relevant, “the geometry being of a crushing banality”.45 The Smithsons felt the social role that the street played in communities required emphasising and whilst noting the benefits cars were bringing to society also observed how it was creating fundamental problems:

“Mobility has become the characteristic of our period. Social and physical mobility, the feeling of a certain sort of freedom, is one of the things that keeps our society together, and the symbol of the freedom is the individually-owned motor car. The roads form the essential physical infra-structure of the community. The most important thing about roads is that they are physically big, and have the same power as any big topographical feature, such as a hill or a river, to create geographical, and in consequence social, divisions. To lay down a road therefore, especially through a built-up area, is a very serious matter, for one is fundamentally changing the structure of the community.”46

Whilst sharing the established belief that higher densities were the only solution for the growing populations in cities47 the Smithsons (similar to Poplar Borough Council) believed that the use of tower blocks presented increasing problems. Building higher, they felt, resulted in a reduced connection to the ground and its outdoor spaces along with creating a feeling of alienation from the wider neighbourhood. They therefore attempted to humanise the modernist theory of building tall, declaring that above six stories, in any building, the sense of being on a street had disappeared. It was the idea of the street, not necessarily its reality which they felt needed to be maintained in order to create a successful community.48

The Smithsons famously developed a concept of Le Corbusier, first seen tentatively in the ‘maison à redent’ blocks of Ville Contemporaine, into one they coined as ‘streets-in-the-air.”49 (Fig 3.1) This they felt provided a more cohesive alternative to the high-rise point blocks. The ‘streets-in-the-air” were to become sociable places with their own

46 Smithson A and P. Team 10 Primer, p.51
48 Ibid. p.52
Golden Lane City

Streets-in-the-air creating a network of connectivity. Roads pass uninterrupted below.

Golden Lane City

It was hoped districts would develop their own identity. The streets-in-the-air would create a network of connectivity between re-identified city districts.
identity where neighbours could chat, children could play and residents could live, elevated above the ever-increasing traffic (Fig 3.3). More importantly the new-elevated streets could co-exist above roads operating as a completely separate connected system of routes that would allow a means of mobility and association with the surrounding community. Clusters of accumulated buildings could be connected over time allowing the dispersed and scattered sites in cities (exemplified by the bomb damaged East-End) to be developed as part of an ongoing process (Fig. 3.4). It was argued that the decks in Golden Lane would be places, not corridors or balconies: but thoroughfares, wide enough to accommodate milk floats, where there were ‘shops’, post boxes and telephone kiosks. The increased horizontal communication between residents aimed at creating a greater social cohesion resulting in a new type of urban development with aims of connection, identity and community.

“Where a deck is purely residential the individual house and yard-garden will provide an equivalent life pattern to a true street or square; nothing is lost and elevation is gained”.

The Smithsons’ competition proposal for Golden Lane was submitted in order to redevelop part of the Bunhill Fields area of the City of London in accordance with the principles of Urban Re-Identification. This included the previously explored notion of House, Street, District and City. With the population density approved by the London County Council being 200 persons per acre and the site itself being 4.7 acres. The Smithsons set out to prove that living at high densities did not necessarily mean low standards.

They proposed three levels of ‘streets-in-the-air’, each with 90 families, with the group activity concentrated in two square crossings at the street intersections (Fig 3.7). These aimed at creating pausing/lingering spaces indicated by a change in ceiling level from single height on the decks, to triple height. All dwellings were to have their front doors at deck level and their main accommodation above or below deck (Fig 3.6). A key provision

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50 Eisenman P. ‘From Golden Lane to Robin Hood Gardens or if you follow the yellow brick road, it may not lead to Golders Green’, Opposions, Sept 1973
52 Ibid. p.54
Golden Lane Site Layout

Three blocks span the site surrounded by parkland. At the intersections, group activities would be concentrated in triple height spaces.
was for the majority of dwellings to have a yard-garden. This was an area visible from the deck, bringing the out-of-doors activities of a normal house such as gardening, play, pigeons etc. onto the deck, identifying the families with their ‘house’. It was anticipated that the passing stranger’s view would be enriched by glimpses, through the open yard-gardens, with the total penetration of the yard-gardens dissolving the dead-wall effect of the conventional slab block. According to the Smithsons, people were to be its predestined ornament. The yard gardens were to provide an additional benefit to occupants in allowing a space that could be converted into workshops. It was hoped this would reduce the requirement for commuting, an anticipated problem. Whilst observing the increase in recent years in the provision of mixed-use live/work units in housing developments, the provision in the 1950’s for such spaces would have been nothing short of revolutionary.

“The hope is that the city will resolve itself into fully identified Quarters: people associated with offices, live near offices, those with factories near factories. The provision is made for free choice with the opportunity for living and working in proximity to exist. To cause an urban revival – a new city in which the home will be very much the centre of all activities.” (Fig 3.5)

Reyner Banham, perhaps one of Golden Lane’s strongest advocates talks about the scheme in his article ‘The New Brutalism’:

“(Golden Lane) is notable for its determination to create a coherent visual image by non-formal means, emphasising visual circulation, identifiable units of habitation, and fully validating the presence of human beings as part of the total image – the perspectives had photographs of people pasted on to the drawings, so that the human presence almost overwhelmed the architecture.”

Above all else, the Smithson proposal set out to demonstrate to society that high densities and tight restrictions on budget need not result in a low standard of living. It was declared at the time that “an infinitely richer and more satisfactory way of living in cities is available here and now”.

The competition was finally won with a highly commended design submitted by the architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, with the Smithson proposal not even following as a runner up. Despite this rejection, the Smithsons’ continued to extensively publicise their design within the architectural press resulting in it becoming one of the most highly influential designs for other social housing estates within the post-war period. The polemical writings expressed by the Smithsons during this period become widely absorbed by both students and professionals of the time with concepts such as ‘streets-in-the-air’ becoming firmly routed into the British branch of the Modernist Movement. Most notably this can be viewed in the street decks of the now Grade II listed Park Hill estate in Sheffield as well as with many other 1960’s post-war social housing estates. For the Smithsons themselves however, it would be nearly fifteen years following the LCC’s decision to reject Golden Lane, before they would finally get the chance to implement many of these ideas themselves at the Robin Hood Gardens estate. Despite over a decade and a half having past, the design of both estates remains remarkably similar.

54 Ibid. p.58
55 Ibid. p.75
Robin Hood Gardens
Site Layout
A and P Smithson

The building blocks organised along the edges of the site create a central 'stress free' zone for the residents.

(Fig 3.8)

Ordnance Survey Map of the site before building

It was originally hoped to develop the whole block, leaving the schools in the centre of a largely traffic free super block.

(Fig 3.9)
Robin Hood Gardens

The Robin Hood Gardens development in 1967 was one of the Greater London Council’s schemes to increase the rate of redevelopment in the East End. The Smithsons were originally appointed by the LCC in 1963 to design a housing scheme embracing three smaller sites in the vicinity of Manisty Street. The design submitted widely reflected the philosophy of Golden Lane, including two buildings with ‘deck’ access that would ultimately be joined with those of further buildings when sites became available.  

When the GLC succeeded the LCC in 1965 however, the new Council, under great public pressure, increased its demolition strategy to include the hugely unsuccessful Grosvenor Buildings on a nearby site. These initially difficult to let housing blocks had far outgrown the proposed population of 1,392 persons to over 2000, creating a large population overspill. Although they had replaced a very bad slum, it was commented that the buildings “did not themselves bear an enviable reputation,” with tenants complaining that the buildings were insanitary and verminous.  

In April 1965 the GLC agreed to acquire, by compulsory purchase, a larger site of just over five acres, bounded by Robin Hood Lane, East India Dock Road, Cotton Street, and Poplar High Street (Fig 3.9). The Grosvenor Buildings and other older properties were to be demolished displacing over 1,200 people at the estimated cost of acquisition and clearance of £709,000. In total the acquisition provided a much larger and consolidated site of about 7½ acres for the housing redevelopment.  

The original brief was withdrawn and in the spring of 1966 the Smithsons were given a new brief informed by the latest Parker Morris standards, ‘Homes for Today and Tomorrow’ (1961).  

Despite being widely familiar with local authorities, it is interesting to note that by 1965 only 20 percent of new councils had fully incorporated Parker Morris recommendations. This can be attributed to the cost of local authority housing having risen from £1,611 per unit in 1961 to £2,951 per unit in 1967. Parker Morris recommendations were therefore often omitted as a cost saving exercise. Robin Hood Gardens was the first development of the newly formed Tower Hamlets Borough Council (April 1965) to incorporate these standards and despite the additional cost, the initial success of the larger flats resulted in the borough incorporating Parker Morris recommendations into all of its subsequent housing stock.  

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60 GLC Planning Papers, March 1965  
Organisational Diagram

Highlighting the design decisions reflected in the unit organisation. Spaces were largely located to reduce noise infiltration.

Robin Hood Gardens South Elevation

The people as the buildings’ 'predestined ornaments'
The new design and layout for Robin Hood Gardens was governed largely by the noise of traffic from three sides of the site. This included the Blackwall Tunnel approach immediately to the east, Cotton Street (then the main access road to the Isle of Dogs) to the west, and the busy East India Dock Road (six lanes wide) to the north. To respond to the growing requirement in Poplar for more open space, the Smithsons organized the buildings along the edges of the site, buffering the noise and creating a large ‘stress free’ open space which all the dwellings share and look out onto (Fig 3.8). The buildings incorporated the Smithson ‘streets-in-the-air’ philosophy with the access decks and living rooms positioned on the ‘outside’ in order to muffle the noise from the traffic (Fig 3.11). In these living spaces it was argued that outer noises are offset by living noises so that it isn’t noticeable. The GLC still insisted however that the sound level in living rooms with windows partly opened should be below that recommended in the Wilson Report, which gave permissible noise levels by day at 50dBA and by night 35dBA. As a solution, further acoustic measures were put in place, such as absorbent lining designed into the window heads, projected sills and vertical concrete mullions to help prevent sound travelling across the façades dwelling to dwelling. The bedrooms and dining-kitchens were situated on the quieter ‘inside’ of the building further insulated by the interior circulation spaces and corridors.62 Further measures to reduce noise included the construction of a 10ft acoustic barrier wall on the road edge surrounding the site.

The buildings themselves consist of two relatively slim ‘slab’ blocks. The longer, seven-storey block is cranked slightly along Cotton Street at the west of the site, with the taller, ten-storey block angled slightly away from the Blackwall Tunnel approach to the east (Fig 3.12). The street decks reflect those proposed at Golden Lane, providing access at deck level, serving every third floor, with the main accommodation positioned above or

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Robin Hood Gardens
eastern elevation.

Overlooking the Blackwall Tunnel, Canary Wharf is pictured in the background with the Blackwall DLR located on the left.

(Fig 3.14)

(Fig 3.15) At the base of the taller Eastern Block. Houses are raised above ground into the air. All apartments have balconies overlooking the central landscaped 'quiet' space.
below (Fig 3.13). The deck itself is articulated outside the front doors to provide alcoves designed to provide individual shielded ‘pause places’. Here it was hoped, residents would personalize as an equivalent ‘yard-garden’ space, perhaps having to omit the real thing due to cost or space requirements. Unfortunately the difference without the ‘yard-gardens’ being present, all too obviously, can be seen to create the ‘dead wall’ effect that the Smithsons were trying to avoid in their proposal for Golden Lane.

The size of flats in the blocks epitomises the late sixties drive toward mixed-use developments, ranging from a mixture of two person to six person dwellings with the space provided being extremely generous, even by Parker Morris standards. The Smithsons decided on a complicated layout of flats consisting of alternating L-shaped masionettes in between the street decks, allowing living rooms and bedrooms of neighbouring flats to be respectively grouped together (Fig 3.16). This was a deliberate strategy to combine a units quiet spaces with those of its neighbours to help minimise the potential noise infiltration between dwellings. As residents have commented, this is something which has proved successful, the council rarely receiving complaints of noise between neighbouring dwellings. The range of dwelling sizes which the Smithsons managed to incorporate into the two blocks is also a successful combination of carefully considered space planning and flexible unit adaption. The range of flats, remaining anonymous from the outside are concealed by the building’s overall uniform aesthetic, reflecting the non-hierarchal ambitions displayed decades earlier at the Parallel of Life and Art exhibition. No dwelling, despite its size, is considered more important than the greater collection, in this case the estate community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Robin Hood Gardens accommodation types</th>
<th>Elderly</th>
<th>2 Person</th>
<th>3 Person</th>
<th>4 Person</th>
<th>5 Person</th>
<th>6 Person</th>
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<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
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(Fig 3.16) Elevation showing distribution and variety of accommodation. Old peoples flats are found on the ground floor with a mixture of two - five bedroom flats found throughout.
On the ground floor there are 38 flats for elderly people, 143 garages and 10 motor-cycle stores, plus service areas which are contained within two ‘moats’ which run along the outer edge of each block and are set below garden and street level. These ‘moats’ therefore remain out of sight, containing the noise and vehicle fumes whilst making use of natural light and ventilation. The garages, bestowed as part of the Smithsons recognition of the increasing importance of the car, provide for 70% of the flats. It was decided that more would be added as the demand grew although this was never to be the case.

Architecturally the blocks on the estate adhere to the left ‘as found’ Brutalist aesthetic, largely consisting of rough concrete which is subtly tailored to evolve a form-language to indicate and enhance use. Concrete at eye level is smooth and moulded such as is the case with the balcony handrails encouraging a human touch. Further away however, concrete which is unused, remains rough. The street-deck is clearly pronounced for horizontal movement whilst the lifts are clearly pronounced shafts of vertical movement (fig 3.16). Where deck and shaft meet, a double height space emphasizes a definite place similar to what was proposed for the intersection locations at Golden Lane. As seen in the ‘Patio and Pavilion’ exhibition, the dwellings are stated as enclosures but the exact internal use left open to interpretation to reflect a residents personal ‘identity’.

65 Smithson A & P. Changing the Art of Inhabitation, p.112

Typical three bedroom unit.

Kitchen at same level as access deck, Living Room above (in this example) on noisy side located lengthways.

Opposite

Typical Housing Layout of three and four bedroom dwellings, above, at and below deck level.

Explored View, Plans, diagrammatic section and diagrammatic elevation.
In the 1971 August issue of *Architectural Design*, Peter Smithson discussed his thoughts on the art of repetition. He suggests how architects had seemingly lost the formal technique at a time when they were using it most. Clearly translated at Robin Hood Gardens the repetitive quality can successfully be seen to produce a satisfactory degree of complexity to the design whilst using mass-produced standardised elements providing cost effective advantages. By comparing the estate to a series of classical monuments (Fig 3.19 - Fig 3.22), the repetition of the windows and vertical concrete mullions creates a similar aesthetic effect, producing a Brutalist language entirely unique in character. The scale of this repetition is monumental. Smithson comments:

“When I am moved by repetition it is by very grand, very simple affairs, which on reflection all have similar properties – they are dominated by big-scaled repetitions and are bent or curved on plan so that repetition in a mechanical sense seems melted away.”

In total there are 214 flats at Robin Hood Gardens housing 700 people, producing a density of about 142 persons per acre; which exceeded the GLC’s required figure of 136 persons per acre. This higher figure was adopted to allow future development to take place at a lower density toward the noisier East India Dock Road although this was in fact not carried out.

*Construction*

Work on Robin Hood Gardens began in 1968 with very few set backs to the design. The scheme was originally designed with a reinforced-concrete box-frame construction, but during the working-drawing stage, at the suggestion of the construction engineers, Ove Arup & Partners, casting construction systems were explored and the Swedish SUNDH system was chosen. Following the Collapse of Ronan Point in 1968, new standards were introduced requiring the walls and joists to be strengthened and the concrete cladding fixings to be changed. The only other amendment made to the original design was the substitution of a dry-wall partition system for block work walls upon a recommendation by the building contractors. Robin Hood Gardens was finally opened in 1971 and completed in 1972 at a final estimated cost of £1,845,585. It quickly became widely published.

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66 Smithson P. ‘Simple Thoughts on Repetition’, *Architectural Design*, August 1971

(Fig 3.20) Park Crescent, London  
(Fig 3.21) Rue de Rivoli, Paris  
(Fig 3.22) Bibliotheque Sainte-Genevieve, Paris

Robin Hood Gardens facade mullions, used to protect against noise are also a formal device creating a complex repetition. Historically this technique has been utilised to provide an interesting aesthetic using mass produced elements.
Reviews of the estate

Following the completion of the estate in 1972, it was unsurprising, given the wide influence and acclaim of the Smithsons, that Robin Hood Gardens prompted international interest. Twenty years after they had propelled themselves to the forefront of post-war ideological thinking, with much of their theory developed towards living in cities and housing in particular, it had been long anticipated that one of their schemes would finally be realised. A number of articles appeared in the architectural press, reviewing and ultimately criticising the scheme. It was generally felt that it fell:

“short of the mark” with “the built reality of Robin Hood Gardens [being] less convincing than the theory behind it”.71

In an early review of the estate in Architecture Plus, Anthony Pangaro examines Robin Hood Gardens with the prospect of its providing a model for future social housing in the United States. The critique is extremely interesting on the grounds of its being written in the same year that Oscar Newman published his book on ‘Defensible Space’ (1972), the ideas of which were to become highly influential. Pangaro’s article in many ways can be seen to criticise the estate following many lines of reference to Newman’s concepts.

The book highlighted how architectural and urban design could foster negative behaviour, with the findings drawing links between higher crime rates and high-rise developments. It was said that for the first time crime, family disintegration and social instability, were no longer being regarded simply as characteristic of low income groups but were

Street Decks

The Access Decks were criticised as being too narrow to signify themselves as individual “streets-in-the-sky”.

now being correlated to particular building types. ‘Defensible Space’ concluded that antisocial circumstances were the result of residents largely feeling they had no control or responsibility in communal areas occupied by so many people. The book drew attention to ways in which design could encourage inhabitants themselves to enhance their own security, with the theory dividing into four factors that define a ‘defensible space’: Territoriality, Natural Surveillance, Image and Setting.

At Robin Hood Gardens, Pangaro largely criticised the lack of surveillance provided by the flats themselves. Observations of wear and vandalism witnessed in the entrance blocks, lift lobbies and access decks were attributed to their isolation and clear lack of ownership (Fig 3.23). Amusingly, emphasis on these points is placed in an alarming statement declaring that this isn’t happening in New York... but in ‘civilised London’! When compared to the generous lift foyers of Le Corbusiers ‘Unité d’Habitation’ and ‘Immeuble villas’ apartment blocks, the access to the pedestrian decks at Robin Hood Gardens were highlighted as mean, impersonal and isolated promoting negative behaviour (Fig 3.26). The formal narrowing of the deck toward the lift lobby was further criticised arguing it suggested more of an escape stair than a main entry.

The biggest shortcoming seen in the criticisms of Robin Hood Gardens surrounded the schemes access decks (Fig 3.24). These “streets-in-the-air” were seen as a shadow of what they were supposed to be, offering no real play spaces, no gathering spaces and no connections to indoor communal spaces. It was felt that in reality these ‘streets’ presented nothing more than mere access corridors. Once again following themes presented in

72 Pangaro. (June 1973) ‘Beyond Golden Lane’ Architecture Plus, Vol 1 No. 5, pp.36-45
74 Pangaro. (June 1973) ‘Beyond Golden Lane’ Architecture Plus, Vol 1 No. 5, pp.36-45
Fig 3.25

The outdoor porches were criticised for having a lack of ownership. In most cases they were and are still unused. A few have plants outside but most are empty.

Fig 3.26

The narrow stairwells were seen as threatening locations where confrontation could take place.
Defensible Space, writers criticise the ‘pause places’ adjacent to each flat, noting how they allow no definition of private territory or any sense of belonging to individual occupants, while the dwellings themselves virtually turned their backs on the decks, eliminating the benefits of natural surveillance (Fig 3.25). One critic commented:

“In Robin Hood Gardens, neither the streets nor the dwellings, accommodate activities useful for socialisation. The wide access galleries are primarily circulation spaces and are only incidentally available for neighbourhood exchange. The outdoor areas adjacent to the dwelling units miss their chance to serve as front porches or stoops because they allow no definition of private territory or any sense of occupant ownership. The dwelling units are all but disconnected from the “street” (imagine the difference if there were only a kitchen window on it, and a real stoop).”

The removing of natural surveillance/eyes on the ‘streets’ as seen at the decks of Robin Hood Gardens is obviously a marked difference from the neighbourhood scenes the Smithsons had observed at Bethnal Green; there is a removal of the ability to supervise children playing from inside the home whilst also minimising the security of being able to see who comes and who goes.

Contrasting with these criticisms however, the scheme in terms of a spatial hierarchy was regarded as fairly successful; the open space at the centre denoting the public domain, the decks forming the semi-public with the flats themselves being private. What was further praised was the articulation at the smaller scale between the semi-public deck and private cell. As with the proposal for Golden Lane, the interior staircase of the duplex apartments is arranged parallel to the deck yet behind the entry plane. This according to one critic, creates two successful results; firstly as an extra sound buffer between the noisy public deck and internal private zones of the home and secondly as a space which mediates a transition from public to private. Whilst removing the security benefits to the access deck that an occupied kitchen would have added, the staircase does increase the notion of privacy and noise infiltration as a compromise, something we know to have been at the forefront of the Smithsons’ design agenda. It is therefore a difficult issue to argue, depending on what a person believes is more fundamental to a successful home.

What we can determine is, that as self contained “streets-in-the-air”, access to each block in Robin Hood Gardens is limited to residents and their correct corresponding key cards. As Jane Jacob’s book ‘The Death and Life of Great American’ cities considers, smaller defined neighbourhoods often provide better support networks where everyone becomes acquainted with each other. We can assume that over time residents living at each deck-level of Robin Hood Gardens would begin to recognise each other, creating the same notion of familiarity and neighbourliness that both Jane Jacobs and the Smithsons had recognised as important in the development of security. In this way we can speculate whether Robin Hood Gardens with its separate self contained floors is in fact more successful than what Golden Lane would have proved to be. With the additional connection of “streets-in-the-air” to other buildings, access to these floors would have been far less controlled. As is the case of many estates, vandalism is generally conducted not by those living there but by opportunistic criminals who use the many points of entry and access as escape routes, something Golden Lane would have been extremely susceptible to. After forty years, despite the early criticism of the lack of active surveillance onto the decks, Robin Hood Gardens displays little vandalism at deck level, rather with it having been concentrated in the more anonymous communal spaces such as the lift lobbies and car moats.

75 Pangaro A. (June 1973) ‘Beyond Golden Lane’ Architecture Plus, Vol 1 No. 5, pp.36-45
76 Ibid.
77 Jacobs J. The Death and Life of Great American Cities, pp.304-316
Balconies are criticised as being too mean to accommodate a real use. Not wide enough for table or chairs, they serve an alternative fire escape from the flats.
Further criticisms of the estate sympathise with the Smithsons having to realise their proposal amongst such difficult constraints, governed largely by the noise and pollution from the surrounding roads. Despite these constraints the provision for cross ventilation and dual facing apartments along with the variety of sizes accommodated by the estate was highly commended. It is clear that the Smithsons, working to tight housing budgets, would have had to make sacrifices to certain elements presented in their earlier Golden Lane proposal, such as the provision of yard gardens. Creating enough deck space for communal activities for example is inherently expensive and providing commercial space at each level would have not been viable, as clearly a commercial market would not exist. Whilst at Robin Hood Gardens, as with Golden Lane, the Smithsons had intended that the decks would later be used to link with further sites,\textsuperscript{78} we are left judging the estate merits as an estate in its own right, something many critics fail to acknowledge. It is clear that the heroic scale of the ideas presented in Golden Lane could simply not translate into the fraction displayed in the two buildings at Robin Hood Gardens.

Upon completion of the estate, the Brutalist aesthetic was already well on its way to becoming highly unpopular with the British public. The failure of positive communities to form early on in other Brutalist estates meant that an association was widely being applied to the style. Robin Hood Gardens became quickly pigeon holed into the same category as many other mass-produced unsuccessful blocks. With architectural critics seemingly unconvinced by the realisation of the Smithsons’ own polemic, it can be seen that the community at Robin Hood Gardens would itself be the only thing left to prove the ideas of the architects. This was never to be the case. In 1984, a poll conducted by Thames TV voted Robin Hood Gardens along with the Alton West Estate in Roehampton and Erno Goldfinger’s Trellick Tower as Britain's top three worst modern buildings.\textsuperscript{79} Whilst this might have sealed their fate, in a twist of fortune the Alton West Estate and Trellick Tower have become two highly desirable places to live, both achieving Grade II listed status in 1998. A one bedroom flat at Trellick Tower has recently been sold for £250,000.

Despite all three of the estates having a poor history of crime and anti-social behaviour attributed to them, such a turn around in fortune highlights what once could have been perceived as an unforeseen future for these Brutalist monuments. New questions must now be asked to why these estates became such unsuccessful places to live in the first place. After all, the fabric of the architecture has largely remained unchanged.


\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Building Design} “Thames TV’s Best and Worst”, 6th April 1984
Twentieth Century Society information leaflet.

Robin Hood Gardens is pictured on the cover.
“It has heroic scale with beautiful human proportions and has a magical quality. It practically hugs the ground, yet it has also a majestic sense of scale, reminiscent of a Nash terrace.”

Richard Rogers

“Personally, Robin Hood Gardens is one of my favourite projects, and as a Tutor at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, I would take my students to study the actual, physical building, to experience the space and light of the development, and to use this building to reflect on their own architecture. The project contributed to my own work and understanding of architecture.”

Zaha Hadid, Zaha Hadid Architects

“I believe Robin Hood Gardens to be the most significant building completed by my parents…. They were particularly proud of the complexity that arises from the disposition of different flat types, the massing, composition and proportion of the blocks.”

Simon Smithson, Director Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners, and son of Alison and Peter Smithson

“It is innovative not only for the organisational idea, but also for the way in which the buildings organise the whole space of the estate, giving it a strong identity in a very hostile situation. … It is perfectly imaginable that with proper judgment about tenant mix, RHG could house a satisfied community, and in different circumstances I would be happy to live in it … I know architects in France, Italy, Switzerland and Holland who are incredulous that a building of this stature and profile should be threatened, when it could realistically be renovated.”

Peter St John, Caruso St John

The external fabric of the building is visibly run down. Cracked concrete, broken glass and rusted paneling.

In recent months anti-social problems have been left to escalate as Tower Hamlets have further neglected the estate.
Chapter 4

The Present Day

When investigating the opinions of the estate residents today there is very little
disagreement that Robin Hood Gardens is dirty, run down, falling apart and overcrowded.¹
An air of neglect, now suffocates the site, vastly heightening the original sense of
detachment and isolation caused by the four surrounding trunk roads.

Visiting the estate initially in February 2009 I was not surprised to discover the buildings
in a poor condition, with crumbling concrete, peeling paint work, damaged window
and broken doors (Fig 4.2). More surprising however was the observation contradicting
the claims in the press that graffiti and vandalism were common place. If anything the
buildings presented a clear lack of vandalism, with many homes appearing well looked
after and neatly maintained. More recently, as has been published in Building Design
magazine, such problems have appeared to have escalated as the council has increasingly
been blamed for further neglecting the estate’s problems in the run up to the buildings’
demolition, in order to encourage residents to move out.² (Fig4.3) Tim Archer, deputy
leader of the Tory group and a prospective Parliamentary candidate notes:

“There’s been an ongoing lack of investment but there’s a real lack of focus on the
estate at the moment.... Part of me worries that it suits [the Council] that it is left to get
even more run down because it encourages people to give up their objections and to
accept the first option of a new home… I hope it’s not the case.”

With respect to security, problems on the estate can best be exemplified by a feeling of
anxiety when journeying into the hidden sub-level car moats (Fig 4.4) and narrow enclosed
staircases and entrances (Fig 3.26). All of these spaces seem restricted, unsurveyed and
cut off from the surrounding community, presenting a lack of escape routes which results
in their feeling unsafe. The stairwells, narrow and arranged in a dogleg formation, turn
blindly back on themselves, hiding what may be around the corner, creating the perfect
location for mugging or surprise confrontations.

Amongst residents the greatest disaffection with Robin Hood Gardens is something
which is exemplified as a general problem with post-war concrete housing. This is the
tendency of these buildings to leak.³ And Robin Hood Gardens is clearly leaking a
great deal. After meeting with the present day Estate Officer, Prosper Okunnuga, the
problem he faces is quickly recognisable. Whilst solely responsible for the management
of eight blocks including the two at Robin Hood Gardens, the huge task presented for
one man is excessive. Of all the eight blocks Mr Okunnuga condemns the Smithsons’
design, due to the challenge with regard to maintenance that the complex arrangement
of flats presents. Whilst it has been highly successful with respect to noise infiltration
between apartments, the complexity has made detecting the source of leaking pipes
near impossible and extremely time consuming. Shadowing Mr Okunnuga about the
estate on a daily round, it quickly became apparent how the majority of complaints were
with relation to water infiltration between flats. Katherine Schonfield in her essay ‘why
does your flat leak?’ attributes the common cause in modernist concrete estates to three

1 East End Advertiser (14th March 2008) ‘Robin Hood ‘Homes vs. Heritage’: Residents and
Architects clash’, www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk/ - accessed on 20th Feb 2008
bdonline.com - accessed 24th Oct 2009
3 Shonfield K. ‘Walls have feelings’ Architecture, film and the city, p.32
The car moats have never been fully utilised and now provide a secluded location for squatting, drug dealing and illegal occupancy.

118 Robin Hood Gardens. Water Damage to the apartment still visible from 1984. 

118 Robin Hood Gardens. Leaks are commonplace. Three years since the leak began and still nothing has been done. The wallpaper has been damaged and mould is highly visible on the carpet.
central reasons: cost-cutting, inappropriate components and poor supervision during the construction process. Robin Hood Gardens like many other estates is clearly very much in need of major investment.

Further problems are largely the result of anti-social behaviour which according to Mr Okunnuga is ever increasing. People from outside the estate use it as a location to deal drugs, favouring the many escape routes presented and the seclusion the car moats and surrounding noise barrier wall provide (Fig 4.4). Of the 204 garages provided by the estate only 16 are currently being rented, with the majority of residents, preferring to stay clear of the car moats, favouring other locations to park their vehicles. It is uncertain how many garages are being illegitimately occupied due to an ever-increasing problem of people outside of the estate using them as a location for drug use and squatting. Tower Hamlets in wanting to prevent these subsequent activities are therefore turning a blind eye to residents illegally occupying the garages as it is felt as a lesser of two evils. A degree of control over this area has clearly been lost, something which has clearly not been helped by the isolation the architecture has created.

One resident I met on the estate best exemplifies the problems they have faced. Having bought his house on the right-to-buy scheme in 1981, Mr Obadiah, an 85 year old elderly resident of Robin Hood Gardens condemns the poor service Tower Hamlets council has delivered him throughout his residency. Viewing his home, a ground floor ‘old persons’ flat in the eastern block, initially visible is a scar of a leak he had reported in 1984, which subsequently fixed is still highly visible spanning his bedroom ceiling (Fig 4.5). Most shocking was the response to a recent complaint of water infiltrating the ceiling of his lounge and bedroom. Having reported this on many occasions since 2007, still nothing has been done. Damage was highly visible to his walls, furniture and carpet (Fig 4.6), with the leak having been running for nearly three years. As a leaseholder, having bought his property in 1981, Tower Hamlets had informed Mr Obadiah that they would come to fix the leaking pipes but would be unable to replace any of his damaged items. It is therefore unsurprising that in an interview with the BBC he has declared he is in favour of pulling down the estate:

“They would not be pulling my home down because I don’t call it a home.”

With further leaks commonplace throughout the estate and the general neglect presented by the housing authority, it would be surprising that anyone would want to stay.

Despite this however, 80% of residents maintain that they prefer an extensive redevelopment of the scheme to being decanted and rehoused into new homes. Out of the total housing stock, 10% of the flats have been bought by residents under the right-to-buy scheme. There is a general consensus that the problems faced by the estate can widely be attributed to the poor management and neglect by Tower Hamlets which have contributed to the present poor living conditions. Significantly, a majority of residents do maintain that the design of the estate has provided many benefits to living there.

A testament to the Smithson’s ‘streets in the sky’ concept, both adults and children can be seen to be talking and playing on the decks, particularly at weekends and in the evenings. Shirley Magnitsky, a resident of Robin Hood Gardens, comments in the East

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4 Shonfield K. ‘Walls have feelings’. Architecture, film and the city p.32
7 Ibid.
The central landscaped space has matured into a beautiful setting that is well maintained and frequently used by the residents.
End Advertiser, how the decks have ‘pulled the community together’ making it possible for neighbours to meet. She adds;

“When (RHG) was first built it was very modern and people were fighting to get in. It was very cleverly built. This is a prime spot, that’s why they want to build 3,000 more homes here. The whole thing is about location and money.”

Phil Briscoe, a local conservative councillor whilst not a fan of the estate’s architecture remains in favour of keeping the buildings;

“English Partnerships wants to clear the site as quickly as possible to increase density…and there has to be a limit to how much we can squeeze in...I just want the best solution for the tenants, and a new build would be unlikely to meet the same space standards. All the neighbours come out, all the children intermix. They all run along and play. You don’t realise the impact small things like this have on your everyday life.”

Included in demolition plans as part of the wider Blackwall Reach Regeneration project the future of Robin Hood Gardens has recently become uncertain. Leading the campaign to have the buildings saved are the Twentieth Century Society and Building Design magazine, having gathered the support of the architectural community. A general agreement resides amongst most supporters of the estate who argue that putting aesthetic opinions to one side, broken windows and stained concrete are not in themselves reason enough to warrant the demolition of a building which could, with the right investment, become a desirable place to live.

Whilst a great deal of these supporters agree that Robin Hood Gardens does suffer from both design flaws and gross neglect, it is widely accepted that these can be remedied through intelligent refurbishment. In a letter published in The Guardian, Richard Rogers and Professor of Social Policy Anne Powers both state that the real mistake made was to use Robin Hood Gardens as one of London’s sink estates, housing only the very poorest members of the local community. Criticising Tower Hamlets Council, they believe it is through poor management that the building has fallen into such bad condition and insist that it is going to be dramatically more expensive to decant a whole population and demolish and rebuild on the site than to refurbish the existing building.

Figures revealed by an independent survey conducted by Building Design magazine highlight how the demolition and rebuild cost are estimated at £34 million compared to a refurbishment cost of £28 million. Both Rogers and Powers recognise the vital importance of maintaining an affordable supply of homes in the area especially under the intense pressure of the nearby Olympic development and declare that the real reason for demolishing Robin Hood Gardens is of simple greed and the desire to bring increased density to a prime location.

Supporters of the estate, have argued how a large number of its design features are integral to a scheme which far exceeds the standard inner city post-war estate. The

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8 East End Advertiser (14th March 2008) ‘Robin Hood ‘homes vs. heritage’: residents and architects clash’, www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk - accessed on 20th Feb 2008
Individual allotments are extensively cultivated and neatly looked after. Vegetables are widely grown.
central landscaped ‘quiet zone’ for example, has now matured into a beautiful, natural green space, of which there are few within the wider borough. (Fig 4.7). Here, the extra height of the trees offsets the imposing scale of the overlooking buildings and creates an area framed as very much the communities own. On evenings and at weekends this space is used by residents, promoting the sense of community. Furthermore, the individual planting beds between the buildings and central space are being extensively managed by the residents to grow vegetables (Fig 4.8). These ‘impromptu’ allotments provide a sense of private and defensible space which suggest a high degree of respect between residents for each others property. As Alan Powers of the Twentieth Century Society notes this could not exist unless there was considerable social cohesion on the estate.13

The case at Robin Hood Gardens clearly exemplifies a divide of public opinion which is currently surrounding buildings of a certain type and style. As an important factor with respect to identifying heritage, this furthermore demonstrates the great difficulties that are faced today when attempting to identify which of these buildings, regardless to their present conditions, may one day be perceived as significantly important to future generations.

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The importance of conserving post-war Architecture

The recent contention surrounding Robin Hood Gardens exemplifies not only the great divide in opinion surrounding the estate itself but also highlights current attitudes towards post-war housing estates and their conservation in general. Whilst to many these buildings represent outstanding examples of our post-war heritage, others view them as failed unattractive experiments, which require demolition in favour of more proven alternative solutions. A moral dilemma exists: on the one hand, it is important not to let people inhabit buildings that have proved unsuccessful whilst conversely, it is equally important to save buildings which form a significant and important addition to our architectural heritage.

English Heritage and the Twentieth Century Society, both heavily involved with the recent Robin Hood Gardens listing application, understand that there is a vital role to bring housing and conservation together:

“Housing providers need to see the benefits that can come from understanding what makes some buildings special and ensuring that any changes enhance those characteristics. And conservationists need to understand that people must come first and that unless residents benefit plans for preservation will not succeed.”

A significant argument exists supporting the saving of post-war public housing estates, especially when, through better management and sensitive improvements, these estates can actually provide suitable housing for future generations. Social housing being one of the highest priorities following the Second World War, ultimately resulted in Britain being perceived to be at the forefront of international thinking on housing, with the design of many estates being hugely admired. These estates can therefore be regarded not only as an important part of our own British heritage but also of great interest to the international community. Whilst top architects worked to create many notable projects, it is clear that thousands of unexceptional homes were also still built. This contributes to the general stigma that currently surrounds the conservation of these controversial buildings.

As Anne Power recognises, the majority of housing built in the post-war period was of extremely poor design and construction quality. Between 1950 and 1970, the huge rate of building far exceeded the capacity to manage either the building or the political process; contractors wined and dined politicians, government architects promoted cheap, uniform, off-the-shelf designs and tenants were rarely consulted in a process that was calculated to maximise profits for builders with the provision of cheap, poor quality imitations of the modernist paradigm. These poorly designed estates quickly became

English Heritage criteria for Listing Buildings

- Grade I buildings are of exceptional interest, sometimes considered to be internationally important. Just 2.5% of listed buildings are Grade I.
- Grade II* buildings are particularly important buildings of more than special interest. 5.5% of listed buildings are Grade II*.
- Grade II buildings are nationally important and of special interest. 92% of all listed buildings are in this class and it is the most likely grade of listing for a home owner.
vandalised, damaged and abused, creating the negative ‘no go’ association which would become synonymous with public attitudes toward social housing.

Public housing and in particular Brutalist estates suffer from an image problem widely equated with social exclusion and poverty. It is felt that this poor image, combined with disasters such as Ronan Point have resulted in many people forgetting that whilst many social housing estates are of a general poor quality, a few were carefully designed and well built. By increasing awareness of these good designs through the listing of selected estates it is hoped by conservationists that people will once again appreciate them and want to live in them. The Smithsons’ design at Robin Hood Gardens demonstrated by the simplicity of their early relationship diagrams (Fig 2.2) represents an idealistic approach for all members of society to inhabit in one building, breaking down the perceived barriers of social status. It is with hindsight that we can determine how attempting social engineering at such a large scale was a hugely idealistic pursuit perhaps demonstrating the naivety of the architects’ beliefs. Instead of unifying the classes under a cloth of anonymity, Brutalism and post-war modernist estates became associated with the style representative of the less fortunate. The wealthy simply chose to live elsewhere.

Published recently in *The Times* however, an article supports a theory declaring that Brutalist estates once perceived as irredeemable disasters, are increasingly finding support with a younger generation of buyers. This is significant for two reasons; it firstly demonstrates a heightened awareness of the estates which listing can achieve and secondly indicates a shift in the general negative attitudes that for so long have been associated with social housing. Maligned local authority buildings are becoming the new urban ‘chic’, recognised by culturally elite groups as an important part of our national architectural heritage.

Often heralded as the exception that proves the rule to the general status quo of the Brutalist aesthetic, the Barbican estate in London demonstrates that these buildings can exist as highly desirable places to live (Fig 4.9). The success of the Barbican can be attributed partly to its location but also to a much higher level of management and maintenance than is possible for social housing. A controlled concierge service surveils access to the apartments and each of the eight underground car parks are staffed 24 hours a day. Whilst realising this kind of service on the budgets allocated for social housing is unrealistic, the emphasis should be shifted to determining what strategies have been most successfully implemented at the Barbican and how the available budgets for social housing can be better administered to incorporate those that have proven most effective.

What is perhaps most important when considering the success of the Barbican estate is the realisation that since its completion in 1976 it has never gone through a period of being neglected.

In terms of conservation, English Heritage has stated that suggesting modern buildings for listing, and in particular public housing, has been the most controversial and problematic of all their tasks. Only 0.2% of all listed buildings were built after 1945, highlighting how any post-war architecture must be considered of extreme importance before being considered for listed status. Whilst a building has normally to be over 30 years old to be eligible for listing, a few exceptions have been made when extremely significant buildings such as the Alexandra Road estate, have come under threat. In total there are

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17 Bayley R. *Celebrating Special Buildings: the case for conserving post-war public housing*, p16
19 Ibid.
20 Bayley R. *Celebrating Special Buildings: the case for conserving post-war public housing*, p39
21 Ibid. p.1
The Shakespeare Tower, Barbican Estate

The estate has always remained as one of London's most sought after residencies. Well looked after and centrally located it is hailed as a Brutalist success story.
now 14 post-war housing estates that have obtained listed status and it was hoped by many that the recent attempt to get Robin Hood Gardens listed, given its significant history, would also satisfy the required criteria.

Whilst listing does not ensure protection, it would identify Robin Hood Gardens to be of exceptional architectural and historic special interest. As a result it would ensure that the management of change, especially with regard to adaptation of the estate would be the subject of agreed management plans between Tower Hamlets and English Heritage.

With the borough of Tower Hamlets currently containing three other listed public housing schemes; The Balfron Tower, Keeling House and Usk Street (the latter two having largely now been privatised) it is understandable why the council are maintaining their preference to demolish the estate. With new responsibilities, Tower Hamlets would have to ensure that certain building qualities are upheld, thus dramatically increasing the maintenance costs in yet another protected block of the council’s already overstretched social housing budget. Despite this potential increase in maintaining the estate to conservation standards, the council wouldn’t necessarily receive any additional money to pay for it. Already famously known as one of the poorest local authorities in the country, it is easy to see how another listed building could prove problematic to this already financially blighted borough. Demonstrating an example of what is considered by many to be one of the major drawbacks to the listing system, irrespective of the building’s increased recognition, no extra money is necessarily put forward to pay for the extra costs of repairs and alterations at conservation standards.22

It is clear from the history and design of the estate that Robin Hood Gardens, irrespective of its presented problems, is not of the same category as the multitude of cheap mass produced estates of the post-war period and thus would seem a valid suggestion for protection. The listing appeal was raised in 2008 with the intention of the demolition proposal being revoked in favour of an extensive refurbishment. Despite the support generated for the estate, English Heritage did not see that it fulfilled sufficient criteria to warrant granting it listed status.

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22 Bayley R. Celebrating Special Buildings: the case for conserving post-war public housing, p.13
The Failed listing of Robin Hood Gardens

A statement from English Heritage issued in July 2008 outlines what they feel are the main reasons why, despite careful and scrupulous consideration, the listing of Robin Hood Gardens was declined. A number of factors would have made this listing decision extremely difficult, none more so than the upsurge of coverage which was taking place at the time in both the architectural and popular press. Whilst the listing process, considers both the architectural and historic value of a building, it also makes very clear that which may not be taken into account. This includes, the present ‘popularity’ of a building, its current condition and any imminence of demolition.

The statement, signed by chairman of English Heritage, Lord Bruce-Lockhart, declared:

“The building had failed as a piece of community architecture and as a place for human beings to live, with the indefensibly narrow, uncomfortable, twisting stairwells never having provided adequate access to people’s front doors and with the decks themselves being too narrow to fulfil the brief as community-fostering ‘streets in the sky.’”

Further criticisms included:

“Bleak entrance lobbies and isolated parking areas, the estate being neither innovative nor influential and attracting very little admiration since its construction having been completed in 1972 at the tail-end of a of the “streets-in-the-sky” movement”.23

It was felt that whilst the Smithson Golden Lane proposal had been no doubt highly influential in 1952, influencing many subsequent estates, the couple’s own realisation, twenty years later was already obsolete. Despite twenty years of mass change in society, the Smithsons’ model for large scale housing can be seen to have barely altered. In this way, whilst Golden Lane historically can be seen to have been revolutionary and we can signify its own importance, it is quite understandable why English Heritage consider how two decades later, Robin Hood Gardens was simply perhaps quite ordinary. As Charles Rattray criticises in his essay ‘What is it about the Smithsons?’:

“Whether through arrogance or ignorance, the Smithsons would not move on. Given a housing brief in the Spring of 1966, they pursued the ideas of Golden Lane as if nothing had happened, only this time in an impoverished form with smaller decks and with yards reserved for only a few dwellings.”24 (Fig 4.10)

The statement by English Heritage makes comparisons to other listed estates, namely Park Hill in Sheffield where:

“Built a decade earlier…its streets in the sky were on a more confident scale…therefore more innovative as well as being wider and more accessible.”

This comparison of the ‘streets-in-the-sky’ at Robin Hood Gardens with those at Park Hill, I feel is not in itself, enough of a consideration to dismiss them as unimportant. The Park Hill estate, for example, seen to be a better representation of the original street deck scenes of Golden Lane, could be argued to be a direct result of the architects not having to contend with as difficult site and budget constraints as was presented at Robin Hood Gardens. Whilst Park Hill is crucial in its own right as an early and more heroic example of ‘streets-in-the-air’, the decks at Robin Hood Gardens can still be seen to be significant, measuring approximately 2m across as opposed to the 1.2m standard for similar access gallery estates of the period. As such they still provide enough space for residents to sit out if they wish and allow sufficient space for people to stop and chat without obstructing other residents from passing, offering a generosity which is entirely absent from the majority of other post-war LCC balcony access estates. Whilst Park Hill is crucial in its own right as an early and more heroic example of ‘streets-in-the-air’, the decks at Robin Hood Gardens can still be seen to be significant, measuring approximately 2m across as opposed to the 1.2m standard for similar access gallery estates of the period. As such they still provide enough space for residents to sit out if they wish and allow sufficient space for people to stop and chat without obstructing other residents from passing, offering a generosity which is entirely absent from the majority of other post-war LCC balcony access estates. Whilst Park Hill is crucial in its own right as an early and more heroic example of ‘streets-in-the-air’, the decks at Robin Hood Gardens can still be seen to be of a unique design using the streets, not only as community fostering corridors, but also as an attempt to buffer the noise from the surrounding busy roads. If Robin Hood Gardens had been designed by any LCC architect, perhaps the “street-in-the-air” could be determined as neither ‘innovative nor influential’. However the Smithsons as the architects of the scheme still clearly remains a hugely significant consideration. Robin Hood Gardens is important as the lone realization of an intellectual story, which clearly encompasses the polemical writings, style and aspirations of its architects. Regardless of a particular personal opinion of how significant the Smithsons were, the question can be asked that without Robin Hood Gardens, where else would we go to see their own response in the field which they wrote so extensively about? English Heritage themselves state:

“Buildings are an integral part of our culture. Once lost they cannot be replaced.”25

Aesthetical opinions aside, Robin Hood Gardens is extremely important not only as one of the best examples of the Brutalist movement in London but also as the lone built example of the Smithsons, in a field which their writings and theory have influenced so considerably. Ex-heritage and arts minister Alan Howarth highly criticised English Heritage’s decision in Building Design stating Robin Hood Gardens is of:

“a significant and admirable architectural design” declaring, “wider social and contemporary policy considerations are not for Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)”26.

Responsible for the listing of the Trellick Tower, once highly unpopular and now highly desirable, Howarth is famous for his advocacy of the importance of post-war buildings:

“The post-war years have produced many buildings of outstanding architectural quality. Given the modern pace of change, it is important to identify the best of modern architecture and to give it protection, otherwise there is a risk that it will be lost before its true value can be appreciated.”27

The reasons not to list Robin Hood Gardens that are given by English Heritage therefore seem fairly disappointing. We stand to learn a great deal from the failings of architecture as well as just preserving that what is beautiful and successful. Declaring that Robin Hood Gardens ‘has failed as a piece of community architecture and as a place to live’ is a redundant statement at best, especially when considering the multitude of other possible contributions which are arguably no direct fault of the architecture. Other unpopular estates having also received listed status, including the Trellick Tower and Alton West Estate (previously mentioned with Robin Hood Gardens as being “the three worst modern buildings in the country28”) regardless of their own unsavoury pasts, proves highly contradictory to this argument. It is of no coincidence that the majority of post-war social housing estates have a history of poor living conditions, poor maintenance, poor funding, neglect and isolation with Robin Hood Gardens having proved no different. With residents and scheme supporters widely united that these factors have contributed significantly to the estate’s present poor conditions, its perceived success should surely be irrespective of whether it is considered to be of ‘special architectural or historic interest’.

I find myself most questioning the validity of English Heritage’s decision not to list the estate when regarding the reasoning that Robin Hood Gardens “had failed to fulfil its brief”29. When considering all evidence, despite things that are ultimately wrong with the estate, the brief set out by the GLA to provide high density, quiet, modern housing with plenty of open space for the community is actually something which Robin Hood Gardens can be seen to have satisfied quite admirably.

Dominated throughout the statement as much as the reasoning behind English Heritage’s decision are the many declarations that their decision cannot be swayed by “public will or political pressure”.30 With the listing of post-war social housing estates always proving so controversial, it is clear that English Heritage would want to exemplify the strictness of their selection process:

“Our listing advice is the result of an objective and rigorous approach and cannot be swayed by external pressure – whether it be by politicians, by a media campaign or from passionate enthusiasts.”31

27 Ibid.
28 Building Design. ‘Thames TV’s Best and Worst’ 6th April 1984
30 Ibid.
When considering English Heritage’s role as “a statutory advisory body reporting to the secretary of state for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport”\(^{32}\) it must be asked how, as a self confessed public body directly answerable to the government, they foresee the ability to avoid being swayed by political pressure. Furthermore when considering the listing of past social housing estates, it can be seen that the decisions of English Heritage have historically been highly influenced by the general public. As was explicitly the case during the highly controversial listing of the Park Hill estate in Sheffield (1998), the decision was only recommended after an extensive consultation had taken place with the estate residents, who themselves gave their own approval. It now therefore seems highly disingenuous of English Heritage to state that members of the public no longer have a voice on determining what we can and can not recognise as important examples of our own national heritage.

Regardless whether Robin Hood Gardens should be demolished or not, I am in no doubt that there is enough significant evidence that the estate can be considered of ‘special architectural and historic interest’. The building’s future is clearly a separate issue to that of the listing process with listed buildings sometimes themselves being demolished. Robin Hood Gardens is a good example of how we consider the most controversial elements of our own heritage. There is no question that the estate does have major problems. However problems should be irrespective of judgements of heritage value. Once we recognise something as being significantly of value, the problems can then be addressed.

Reconsidering English Heritage’s observation that Robin Hood Gardens was built twenty years late is a far more significant reflection of the modern architectural industry than it is of the actual quality of the design. Whilst the world at large had moved on from the concept of ‘streets-in-the-air’, this twenty year gap from Golden Lane to Robin Hood Gardens demonstrates something else far more important. The Smithsons, already among the most highly praised, celebrated and respected architects of their generation were of the type who not only theorised about buildings but actually built them. Despite this high profile success, a string of commended buildings and well respected writings it still took them twenty years before they could realise one of their most famous designs. This is perhaps the most significant aspect to understanding the massive support the campaign to save the buildings has within the architectural community. As Peter Eisenman notes following his ruthless critique of the scheme in 1972:

“Whatever the particular flaws of Robin Hood Gardens, whatever the limitations in the original idea of Golden Lane, the achievement of finally realising in built form any ideas must transcend not only my criticism but also the building itself.”\(^{33}\)

For any architect, the ability to realise an idea is extremely rare. Robin Hood Gardens represents an intellectual and ideological position, confirmed in a weight of writing, polemic, and criticism, which is unparalleled in most other estates of its period. Despite all of the shortcomings and problems surrounding Robin Hood Gardens, to many, it still exemplifies the stuff of which real architecture is made.

\(^{32}\) English Heritage - www.english-heritage.org.uk/
(Fig 4.11)  
The Blackwall Reach Regeneration Option 1  
Refurbishment of the estate.

(Fig 4.12)  
The Blackwall Reach Regeneration Option 2  
Demolition and replacement of the estate.
The Blackwall Reach Regeneration Project

The site of Robin Hood Gardens is included for redevelopment as part of the wider Blackwall Reach regeneration project. As a combined initiative between the Borough of Tower Hamlets and English Partnerships, the regeneration aims at improving standards throughout the area including new homes, shops, schools and recreational facilities.\(^34\) Also proposed as part of the regeneration is the covering of the Blackwall tunnel approach, providing new building land whilst reducing the impact of noise and pollution on the surrounding areas.

The draft submitted for the regeneration, conducted by English Partnerships for the borough of Tower Hamlets, included two design options for both the refurbishment and demolition of the Smithson estate with both options evaluated on their merit. Comparison statistics published on the Blackwall Reach website stated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Open Space</th>
<th>Commercial Space</th>
<th>Community &amp; health</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Leisure</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Option 1 Refurbishment</td>
<td>1,750 - 2050 homes</td>
<td>1.5 hectares</td>
<td>33,500m²</td>
<td>1,150m²</td>
<td>2,700m²</td>
<td>700m²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option 2 Demolition</td>
<td>2,500 - 3,000 homes</td>
<td>2 hectares</td>
<td>36,000m²</td>
<td>1,650m²</td>
<td>3,200m²</td>
<td>700m²</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures presented by English Partnerships conclude that by demolishing Robin Hood Gardens more housing can be provided for the area offsetting development costs which will contribute to further increases in open space, community facilities and education. English Partnerships state that:

“The Council supports redevelopment rather than refurbishment because it will provide far more new affordable rented homes for local people, and create greater benefits for the surrounding area.”\(^35\)

Whilst the intention of improving the area is undeniably good for the local people, a number of discrepancies clearly surround the figures which seem so conclusive that demolition is the better option. English Partnerships state that the increased housing provision of the second option is achieved by the inclusion of:

“a larger number of new residential units proposed for the Tunnel Approach which no longer need to match the size of Robin Hood Gardens.”\(^36\)

The belief of English Partnerships’ that the proposed surrounding buildings must reflect the current heights of the Smithson estate is highly questionable. When viewing the two options proposed (Fig 4.11 and Fig 4.12), the building footprints remain more or less unchanged, with the statistical differences achieved by increasing the building heights as part of the option reflecting demolition. With this logic, the Robin Hood Gardens estate is proposed to be replaced by similar shape blocks only having been made taller. If a third option existed in which the estate was to be saved but the surrounding buildings were still proposed to be of a greater height, it would surely be conceivable that similar higher density statistics could be achieved whilst also enabling Robin Hood Gardens to be retained. Whilst there is no evidence suggesting why this hadn’t been considered, it can only be speculated that perhaps English Partnerships had tailored their analysis towards creating a supporting argument for a predetermined agenda.

\(^{34}\) Blackwall Reach Regeneration ‘Project draft development framework document’, www.blackwallreach.co.uk p8 - accessed Oct 2009

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
Many architects believe that if the Smithson blocks are in fact demolished the buildings which will replace them will not only be of far less architectural significance but also stand the possibility of being of a far poorer quality. Recently coined the ‘Pimlico School’ problem, this reflects the choice by many councils to replace significant Brutalist buildings with new designs which ultimately have fared worse as solutions.37

In an artist’s impression of the proposed new development (Fig 4.13) the familiar skyline of Canary Wharf is pictured in the top right of the scene, the proximity of which would undoubtedly appeal to prospective buyers in the private market. When considering this image, it is difficult to imagine that the prime location of apartments, which overlook the landscaped area, are likely to be retained as social housing. Determined in the draft development framework, the new proposal includes a mixture of brand new Housing Association (RSL) homes for rent, shared ownership, and homes for private sale.38 Whilst the current population will have to decant, residents are finding it difficult to get a clear commitment that they will be allowed to return to live in the new development and as such are largely holding out to stay in the estate, regardless of its current problems.39 Whilst the draft declares that the existing council tenants wishing to remain in the area will have the highest priority in being able to apply for one of the new Housing Association rented homes, it also states that those whose preference is to remain as council tenants will have to decant to an existing council home outside the Blackwall Reach regeneration area.40 Robin Hood Gardens, now standing on some of the most valuable land in the Docklands, is clearly being exploited for a commercial agenda.

The prime location of the site, close to both Canary Wharf and the Olympic regeneration also now benefits from being provided with good connectivity to the rest of London from the nearby Blackwall DLR station. Opened in 1994, five minutes walk from Robin Hood Gardens, this station dramatically reduced the estate’s previous isolation which inevitably contributed to the increased interest in the site from commercial developers.

38 Blackwall Reach Regeneration ‘Project draft development framework document’, www.blackwallreach.co.uk p5
40 Ibid.
Published in July 2009, *Building Design* commented on how the recession had caused the number of homes proposed for the Blackwall Reach regeneration to halve due to falling demand. With English Partnerships having determined the money for the improvements in open space and public facilities as a direct response of the large provision of housing, it is clear that the regeneration is now facing real difficulties. *Building Design* signify this as a £40 million black hole.

“Only 1,600 new replacement homes rather than the original 3,000 will be built due to a fall in demand for new private housing, which, together with lower anticipated sale values, means there is now a gaping hole in the council’s plans for Robin Hood Gardens and the wider Blackwall Reach area.”

English Partnerships are being asked to find an extra £13 million to continue buying out the site’s 42 leaseholders signifying how, unless the money can be agreed, the decanting of residents will have to be delayed. Local Conservative councillor Tim Archer said the recession had so altered the scheme’s viability that it is time to revisit all options again:

“There are only going to be 182 extra social housing units now, which feels very low in comparison with the size and cost of the overall scheme and the disruption that will be caused to the existing residents.”

Archer also questioned whether the council would now be able to keep to its deadline on demolishing the estate:

“They need to have bought out everyone by 2011 to begin the decanting,” he said, “but I think that’s looking particularly challenging.”

It seems that despite the failed listing, the global recession is now providing a greater argument to saving the estate and may also provide the single fundamental reason why an extensive refurbishment will, in fact, be the only viable option for the future.

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
The original flats at Park Hill, Sheffield.

A block of the Park Hill Estate in 2008

As part of the re-development, English Heritage has required that all that need be preserved from the Grade II* listed building is the concrete frame allowing extensive changes to take place.

Visualisation of the Park Hill regeneration.

Important aspects of conservation and modernisation are balanced in order to create homes ‘fit for purpose’.
Successful re-development of Brutalist estates

Despite the problems at Robin Hood Gardens, the forty years having passed since its completion has ultimately resulted in the creation of a settled community. Twentieth Century Society Case worker, Jon Wright notes how the largely Bengali population currently residing on the estate, is organically growing into the type of community that the Smithsons had always imagined it to be. Many of the women making up this conservative community have stated how they particularly enjoy using the semi-private street decks to visit their friends in other flats. As Peter Smithson himself once said:

“New typologies take a while for people to catch up with”

As seen with the community street scenes of Bethnal Green, which the Smithsons were trying to emulate, the notion of neighbourliness has perhaps arisen as the result of families staying put in a single area for many generations. As a result residents have had time to get to know one another. This notion of time in the creation of a community is one often overlooked by architects and developers who still often believe that a successful community can be instantaneously engineered by design decision and social implementation. It is with hindsight that perhaps we can ascertain that the biggest mistake which was ever made was to disturb the successful slum communities in the first place. As Jane Jacobs notes when discussing her observations of the North End district of Boston - an area which had been a notorious European migrant slum but had since self-developed itself into the type of cohesive community the Smithsons would have witnessed at Bethnal Green:

“Here was a curious thing. My friend’s instinct told him the North End was a good place, and his social statistics confirmed it. But everything he had learned as a physical planner about what is good for people and good for city neighbourhoods, everything that made him an expert, told him the North End had to be a bad place... Of course despite all the good that was being observed it needed to be redeveloped. They needed to get the people out of the slum”

Many developers, such as Urban Splash, have expressed an interest in Robin Hood Gardens as a possible location for refurbishment. It is widely agreed by all that any case for preserving Robin Hood Gardens is based around what the estate could become, not what it currently is.

Currently redeveloping the ‘streets-in-the-sky’ scheme at Park Hill in Sheffield, Urban Splash have become widely acclaimed for their experience in delivering design excellence and high quality regeneration of existing urban projects. Whilst the Park Hill estate is Grade II* listed, English Heritage have adopted a constructed conservative approach to the re-development allowing less important elements such as the brick cladding to be modernised whilst ensuring key design features such as the concrete frame are preserved (Fig 4.15- Fig 4.17). It is not difficult to consider how a similar approach could be successfully implemented at Robin Hood Gardens.

At Park Hill, the cost of the renovation has unfortunately resulted in only a third of the

44 Architects Journal (27th September 2007) ‘Robin Hood Faces Execution’
45 Ibid.
46 Jacobs J, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, p.10
47 Bayley R. Celebrating Special Buildings: the case for conserving post-war public housing, p.31
The Greater London Council was greatly criticised for refusing to provide a concierge for the tower. The lifts and corridors were overrun by vandals and criminals in the 1970s. Quickly the estate earned the sobriquet the “Tower of Terror”.

Today a concierge has been added and the community has become far more settled. A two bedroom flat has been known to sell for £225,000 as the tower has become a desired location of “urban chic” living.
housing stock being retained as social housing demonstrating what is often a downside to the redevelopment of such buildings. Whilst a similar restructuring would clearly be required at Robin Hood Gardens, the similar danger exists that whilst the fabric of the building may be retained, the original purpose for providing social housing is lost forever (Fig 4.18). As has already been seen within the borough of Tower Hamlets, the restructuring of Lasdun’s Keeling house and Usk street developments have resulted in the listed flats becoming entirely sold to private buyers meaning some of the best examples of social housing no longer serve their original purpose. Consequently the financially blighted council suffers as its social housing stock becomes diminished.

Through an extensive refurbishment, it is not difficult to see how the Robin Hood Gardens could appeal to the private market particularly to that of young professionals and couples. Being considerately designed to incorporate Parker Morris Standards, the estate is far more generous in space than standard private flats built today. As has been demonstrated, many younger buyers are looking past the ‘failed’ delivery of the Brutalist utopian paradigm, appreciating these buildings for their historical significance and intelligent design. The highly publicised contention in the press has raised awareness of the estates significance within the general public perhaps even more dramatically than what would have resulted from a successful listing. With many young professionals indifferent to the more expensive premium that comes from owning a suburban home and a garden, the flats at Robin Hood Gardens and their proximity to the City of London, Canary Wharf, and nearby Olympic development could provide a perfect location for young buyers.

An interesting case study in examining the successful regeneration of a Brutalist estate can be seen with the improvements made at Erno Goldfingers Grade II* listed Trellick Tower. Historically having an extremely poor reputation, once labelled as the ‘Tower of Terror’, the estate benefitted through the inclusion of lobbied additions such as a 24 hour manned concierge, originally cut from the budget. Irresponsibly omitted in a short-sighted attempt to save money, the problems which have resulted from negating such facilities in many local authority estates have often proved far more costly to their respective councils in the long run. Upon the introduction of the concierge service at Trellick Tower, conditions dramatically improved, the residents benefitting from an increased security and monitoring of people entering and exiting the estate. In 1995, a concierge was added to the north western corner of Robin Hood Gardens although this proved far less successful. The multiple entrances of the estate would not benefit in the same way as had been witnessed at the sole entrance at Trellick Tower with it being financially unfeasible to suggest adding one per entrance lobby. Considering this as part of a future refurbishment strategy at Robin Hood Gardens, perhaps there would be significant benefits from reducing the number of access points per block or even in implementing an external concierge monitoring access to the wider site.

Despite the improved living conditions, the redevelopment of Trellick Tower became most highly praised in its ability to raise living standards whilst also maintaining a large proportion of its original social housing stock. The Grade II* listing of the estate in 1998 created a new fashionable persona for the building, which increased the demand for a small proportion of flats which were restructured for the private market. The money provided here created the funds for the repair and upgrading of internal communal areas and facilities to the high levels required by the buildings listed status whilst 90% of the flats were still retained as social housing. Not only was the fabric of the building preserved but equally importantly this highlights a case which demonstrates that listing a building it doesn’t necessarily require it to change its original social housing role. We
The concierge at Robin Hood Gardens

Added in 1995 the concierge provides little benefit to the estate only increasing surveillance to one entrance.

Design research proposal for Robin Hood Gardens by Fletcher Priest Architects. Design submitted as part of a BD competition held in 2008.
can therefore still observe today how it is being used by the very types of people it was designed for. The new mix of private and social, individuals and families, has since allowed the residents to achieve a level of stability far surpassing the poor history of the estate through many years of social difficulties and neglect. Currently reflected within national Housing Policy, a similar notion acknowledges that single tenure estates are far less preferable to those constituting a mix of people, from different backgrounds and wealth.

It is with a careful restructuring of a percentage of the flats at Robin Hood Gardens that many people hope that the community there can remain on site whilst the buildings themselves are upgraded to a level which not only comply with modern standards but also far surpass the current leaking neglected conditions to which the current residents have become subjected. With highly commended developers such as Urban Splash re-inventing some of the few Brutalist monuments which exist in British cities, it is hopeful that we can begin to ascertain, in the near future how these neglected estates may be restructured to perform for future generations as the architects had originally intended.

As Rosalind Bayley comments as part of the Twentieth Century Society’s case for preserving post-war public housing:

“Conservationists want living, evolving buildings that are suited to their original purposes, or a new use, not heritage museums. The residents and owners of social housing want to improve the quality and image of their homes. Bringing housing and conservation closer together is possible and will yield benefits for both retaining valuable buildings and improving the quality of life of those who live in them.”

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49 Bayley R. Celebrating Special Buildings: the case for conserving post-war public housing, p.31
50 Ibid. p41
Robin Hood Gardens Eastern Block pictured with Ernö Goldfinger’s Balfron Tower in the background.

Both monuments exemplify a purity to the Brutalist aesthetic whilst having been executed explicitly to the unique intentions of their architects.
Conclusions

The case at Robin Hood Gardens clearly highlights the all too common problem of councils, whilst contemplating their failed housing policies and past ideologies, seeking to erase their mistakes through the Pavlovian response of demolition. This ‘quick fix’, start again attitude offers no real reflection into why these problems have come about with little insight into how similar mistakes can be prevented and better addressed in the future.

Historically, the problems attributed to fickle aesthetic opinions of a style’s current popularity can be seen to be one of the greatest enemies in the attempt to judge what is worth protecting as heritage. This is particularly an issue today with the consideration of relatively new modern buildings, however it is also something which has been commonplace throughout history. Looking back to the 1960s and 1970s, the integrity of Georgian Bath was punctured by developers demolishing the now hugely desirable stone-built 18th-century terraces. John Betjeman was amongst those who campaigned for various buildings to be saved when they faced demolition including the Midland Grand Hotel forming part of the railway station at St Pancras. It is almost incomprehensible to believe that fifty years ago this building was regarded by a public majority as ostentatious and ugly. Betjeman was also amongst those who protested in 1957 when John Nash’s magisterial Georgian stucco terraces overlooking Regent’s Park faced redevelopment.

“These gloomy terraces,” announced the Art News and Review, “have outlived their utility. Not only are the buildings worn out, but the aesthetic on which they are founded has outlived its day.”

The very same terraces now fetch offers of over £12 million per house. With the successful reinvention of these once hugely disliked Georgian and Victorian buildings, it is not impossible to see how the same circumstances could one day prove applicable to Brutalist apartments as is already visible at the Barbican and Trellick Tower.

“There is enough latent architectural value in these buildings to justify approaching them as buildings that need to be represented rather than disguised. The trick is to rediscover the original architectural value and retrieve that and present it in such a way that people look at the buildings of that period and say ‘this is a fine piece of modern housing’.”

As an example of New Brutalism Robin Hood Gardens is unparalleled, something no better exemplified when viewing it and its position adjacent to Erno Goldfinger’s Balfron Tower. Both demonstrate a purity and individual take on the Brutalist aesthetic which, whilst executed around the same period reflect the individual aspirations and agendas of their own architects. Picturing them together, (Fig 4.22) it seems difficult to imagine one existing without the other, yet they both offer two very different takes on the post-war movement.

Whilst the arguments of whether Robin Hood Gardens has or has not lived up to the social anthropological aspirations of its architects can forever circulate, I believe the estate itself stands, more importantly, as a justified and significant piece of built national heritage. It is a significant link to the past and demonstrates the aspirations of a generation.

51 The Times Online (7th June 2008) ‘Modern architects try to dodge the wrecking ball’, www.timesonline.co.uk - accessed Oct 2009
52 Ibid.
of architects which were striving to rebuild the nation and improve the way people lived on a large and heroic scale. Resonating within its building fabric is the reflection of a significant historic movement, the constraints and shortages of the period, a bold and controversial style, and an idealistic delivery of British modernism to East London, all whilst having to contend with difficult site and budget constraints. Robin Hood Gardens quite simply stands as an example of the welfare state striving to do more than what others were delivering at the time.

Not only does the estate historically reflect the era in which it was built but also represents a unique culmination of ideological thinking concerned with the capacity of ideas to be transposed into built-form, both at the scale of the city and the individual building. This is something realised by very few architects working in the profession. It is of great consequence that the poor management, neglect and failed policy of Tower Hamlets has ultimately led to the early demise of a building which many believe could still prove to be successful.

Robin Hood Gardens is undeniably the realisation of the Smithson polemical writings, where design not only reflects the carefully considered constraints of a difficult site but also the social and ideological aspirations of an era encompassing some of the world’s greatest social changes. Irrespective of whether it is good or bad, the culmination of ideas generated from ‘the Parallel of Life and Art’ into the New Brutalism, the concepts of ‘This is Tomorrow’ into Golden Lane have undoubtedly been translated at the estate. As a piece of ‘architecture’ it is therefore greatly significant as a physical monument, which encompasses the wealth of all these ideas. It exists as a key example of how architects in the post-war period believed we were going to live in a modern world.

Despite its current poor condition and the problems which do exist within the architecture, there should be no case for demolishing a building whose fabric embodies huge amounts of energy and carbon dioxide when a more financially viable alternative for refurbishment exists. With developers and councils increasingly being encouraged to adopt more environmental and sustainable approaches to development, their thinking should surely be moving away from building from scratch, in favour of reusing and reinventing the fabric which we already have. The coincidence that this existing fabric may be of some interest in certain circles is surely just a benefit to strengthen this ever emerging Twenty First Century disposition.

Whilst many other Brutalist estates have been recognised as individually important, Robin Hood Gardens surely deserves similar recognition as the direct response of the Smithsons’ attempt at a post-war Urban Re-identification. As a continuation of this Smithson legacy, a great deal more stands to be learnt from the successful refurbishment of Robin Hood Gardens which could aim to truly realise what the architects were originally striving to achieve. Arguments supporting conservation include the building’s historic significance, its social legacy, financial benefits, environmental incentives and the majority consensus of the current estate residents who are in favour of an extensive refurbishment. An opportunity to preserve Robin Hood Gardens clearly exists. It can only be hoped that, whilst still uncertain, the future of this building lies with this more constructive approach in responding to current estate problems than with the alternative of erasing the building completely from our national architectural heritage.
Appendix 1 -
Robin Hood Gardens Time line

1952  Concept of “street-in-the-air”, developed by architects Alison and Peter Smithson for the competition for Golden Lane London.

1961  Council tenants move into the Smithson-inspired Park Hill estate in Sheffield. London County Council employs private firms to design public housing in response to huge waiting list.

1962  Smithsons added to LCC housing framework.

1966  Smithsons commissioned for Robin Hood Gardens development.

1972  First tenants move in.


1984  Thames Television viewers vote it one of the worst modern buildings in London.

1993  Alison Smithson dies.

1995  Tower Hamlets invites architects to design concierge facilities without consulting Peter Smithson. He calls for the estate to be spot listed. London Dockland Development Corporation rejects the concierge proposals and asks the council to consult Smithson.

1998  Sheffield’s Park Hill estate is listed grade II*.

2003  Peter Smithson dies.

2005  Urban Splash and architects Hawkins Brown and Studio Egret West unveil plans to refurbish Park Hill estate.

2006  A building survey reveals “significant defects to the external envelope” of RHG.

2007  Horden Cherry Lee report for the Blackwall Reach Regeneration Project says homes could be refurbished for £70,000 each, but demolition is also an option.

2008

March  English Heritage to make listing recommendation to MP Margaret Hodge.

April  Outline planning permission to be submitted on redevelopment funded by English Partnerships.

June  English Heritage decline application to grant Robin Hood Gardens
listed status. Richard Rogers claims the real mistake was to let Robin Hood Gardens become a sink estate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Initial appeal is made to The DCMS to reconsider the decision not to list the estate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Twentieth Century Society Campaign to have Robin Hood Gardens saved amongst letters of support from world prominent architects adds pressure to the Government to reconsider their decision not to list the estate. The DCMS confirm that culture secretary Andy Burnham would review architecture minister Margaret Hodge’s verdict.</td>
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**2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>English Heritage refuses to alter its opposition to the proposed listing of Robin Hood Gardens. They issue a response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tower Hamlets Council urge the government to “put people before buildings” as it makes a final pitch to architecture minister Barbara Follett to allow the demolition of Robin Hood Gardens.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Architectural Historian Dan Cruickshank attacks Tower Hamlets and English Heritage over their failure to back the listing of Robin Hood Gardens. He accuses them of a failure to manage to the buildings properly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Andy Burnham and the DCMS turn down an appeal from the Twentieth Century Society to list the estate instead giving it immunity from listing for five years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Resident Darren Pauling, who has lived at Robin Hood Gardens for more than a decade, carries out an independent survey with the help of Bengali interpreters suggesting that around 80% of residents in fact want Robin Hood Gardens retained and refurbished. This greatly contrasts with the council’s survey declaring 80% want the building demolished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>The number of proposed new homes as part of the Blackwall Reach redevelopment is halved owing to falling demand. Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions exhibition is launched at the RIBA in an effort to keep support pressure for saving the estate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Tim Archer, a senior opposition councillor accuses Tower Hamlets Council of deliberately ignoring maintenance problems at Robin Hood Gardens in order to encourage residents to move out so it can demolish the estate.</td>
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Image Sources

Insert

Photo Courtesy of Dave Budden, www.picasaweb.google.com ref. DSX_6027

Chapter One

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Fig 1.2 *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, p98
Fig 1.3 www.flickr.com
Fig 1.4 Smithson A and P. (1970) *Ordinariness and Light*, London, Faber and Faber. p19
Fig 1.5 G.Towers. (2000) *Shelter is not enough; Transforming multi-storey housing*, Bristol, The Policy Press
Fig 1.6 http://apps.newham.gov.uk/History_canningtown/pic47.htm - Photograph Copyright Daily Telegraph, 1968

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Fig 2.1 *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, p114
Fig 2.2 Smithson A and P. (1970) *Ordinariness and Light*, London, Faber and Faber. p61
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Fig 2.5 *Ibid.* p126
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Fig 2.9 *Ibid.* p140
Fig 2.10 *Ibid.* p69
Fig 2.11 *Architects Journal*, ‘Theres no point in saving Robin Hood Gardens unless people want to live there’ Volume 228, Issue 5, p17, 31st July 2008

Chapter Three

Fig 3.1 Smithson P, *Team 10 Primer*, 1959 p77
Fig 3.3 *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, p112
Fig 3.4 Smithson P, *Team 10 Primer*, 1959, p85
Fig 3.5 *Ibid.*, p55
Fig 3.6 Smithson A and P. (1970) *Ordinariness and Light*, London, Faber and Faber. p58
Fig 3.7 *Ibid.*, p55
Fig 3.8 Robin Hood Building Act Gardens Case File - Metropolitan Archives GLC DPTM of Architecture and Design GLC/AR/BR131577
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Fig 3.11 Smithson A and P. (1970) *Ordinariness and Light*, London, Faber and Faber. p190
Fig 3.12 Robin Hood Building Act Gardens Case File - Metropolitan Archives GLC
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Fig 4.1 Twentieth Century Society information Leaflet
Fig 4.2 Author photo
Fig 4.3 BD Online - www.bdonline.com ‘Council ‘running down’ Robin Hood Gardens’ 25th September 2009
Fig 4.4 Author photo
Fig 4.5 Ibid.
Fig 4.6 Ibid.
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Fig 4.8 Ibid.
Fig 4.9 www.skyscrapercity.com
Fig 4.10 Photo courtesy of Ioana Marinescu - Robin Hood Gardens exhibition
Fig 4.11 Blackwall Reach Regeneration www.blackwallreach.co.uk accessed Oct 2009
Fig 4.12 Ibid.
Fig 4.13 Ibid.
Fig 4.14 Ibid.
Fig 4.15 www.wikipedia.com
Fig 4.16 www.bbc.co.uk
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