

The Shape of Social Policies. Architectural Experiences in London Between 1964 and 1979

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Introduction. The issue of Robin Hood Gardens

Given that social housing is one of the most prominent ways governments promote the Welfare State, 2017 marks a significant step in the realm of design's disciplines. This is the year that Robin Hood Gardens, the Brutalist estate by Peter & Alison Smithson, underwent the beginning of the demolition process. Completed in 1972, Robin Hood Gardens embodies the design concept of *street in the air*; an innovative distributive solution pointed out by the two exponents of Team X.¹ Indeed, the galleries and walkways were supposed to re-create the street life typical of ground-level public space. In the Team X Primer, referring to their walkways, the Smithsons write that

... in the suburbs and slums the vital relationship between the house and the street survives, children run about, (the street is comparatively quiet), people stop and talk, dismantled vehicles are parked; in the back gardens are pigeons and ferrets, and the shops are round the corner; you know the milkman, you are outside your house in your street.²

Like many other European counterparts, Robin Hood Gardens can be considered a model of the utopian dream of building up a society for everyone, providing decent accommodation and promoting community lifestyles. In fact, it seems reasonable to view Robin Hood Gardens as one of the most notable examples of that specific design culture of the postwar era, trying to deal with the demands coming from a growing society and, at the same time, eager to protect its roots from the a-topical International Style buildings. Last year, Robin Hood Gardens was showing extreme condition in terms of maintenance and abandon. Despite attempts by starchitects such as Richard Rogers, Zaha Hadid, Robert Venturi and Toyo Ito, who all protested against the demolition of the complex, the estate has been neither protected with a formal heritage listing, nor considered an object of persuasive re-use design able to keep distance between bulldozer and the two pre-cast concrete slabs containing 1013 apartments. This matter opens many questions about the relations between architecture and society. The authors consider the Robin Hood Gardens' case an opportunity for investigating the legacy of London's postwar design era, an age permeated by a unique cultural environment encouraging the development of both strictly contextual-related and utopian experiences. The paper focuses on the same ambiguity of the relationship between public and private realm emerging from the concept of the *street in the air*, as a means used by architects and planners to test innovative settlement patterns and mix with traditional ones, turning

¹ The first *street in the air* appeared few decades before, in Justus Van Effen Complex (1919-1922) by Michiel Brinkman, in Spangen, Rotterdam. This concept finds applications also in Park Hill Estate (1957-1961), by Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith, Sheffield. For reference see Per Aurora Fernandez, Javier Mozas, *10 stories of collecting housing* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: a+t Architecture Publishers, 2013), 12; Ben Highmore, "Streets in the Air," in *Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern: Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond*, eds. C. Zimmerman and M. Crinson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 81.

² Alison and Peter Smithson, *Team X Primer* (London: Studio Vista Limited, 1968), 78.

this architectural season into a high reinterpretation of modern principles applied to re-shape society. In particular, the article tries to demonstrate that, on one side, the public spaces rejected monumentality in favor of more equilibrated human relations; on the other, the supposed-to-be private spaces, like housing, encouraged collective lifestyles, reinterpreting the traditional typologies.

Methodology

The authors assume that the policies adopted after World War II, together with the fertile cultural background spreading in the 1960s, were the main engines fueling the crucial architectural experiences of the time. So, we propose an approach based on the political periodization of the government leadership by framing three time-spans according to the ideological criteria (1945 – 1955; 1955 – 1964; 1964 – 1979). Secondly, we summarize the cultural context to suggest the references, the goals and the meanings lying behind the architectural production. Then, we present four significant housing case studies and one public building, whose construction started in the period between 1964 and 1976 in order to highlight how designers tried to express the ideals of the Welfare State. The distinction between private and public realms appears pointless, since all cited case studies share a peculiar attention to the spatial relationship between the building and the urban environment surrounding it. The authors focus their investigations on the ambiguous notion held by idealist architects of postwar era to shape the city on the collective



Fig. 1: Robin Hood Gardens (1966-1972) before demolition. Architect Peter & Alison Smithson

dreams and aspirations, as well as to face tradition in a contemporary way, forging the identity of a society.³ In particular, we will focus on the space of transition connecting the buildings to the city, since we found in that peculiar condition the best expression of the political intention of the time. In 1984 Chiurini, who was reporting the housing condition in Great Britain, considered the most authentic expression of popular culture, the house including the urban environment close to the dwelling, which for most people in the UK was more important than the inner space itself.⁴ Similarly to Chiurini's observation, the authors suggest that the forms designed by this generation of architects were related to the political ideology, the cultural background, as well as the market taste of the time, and this is clearly recognizable in the space of transition between entrances and surroundings.

Framing three decades of policies 1945 – 1979

From the end of World War II to the introduction of the right-to-buy

Many scholars have focused on the history of the Welfare State.⁵ We consider the political period starting after the end of World War II until the defeat of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, when a drastic change permeated domestic policies, especially in the matter of housing, since Thatcherism liked to present itself as a rejection of the postwar, state-driven governance. Indeed, the milestone was the 1980 Housing Act, introducing the well-known Right-to-buy Act: a law that permitted tenants to buy their houses with financial subsidies. With the promulgation of this act, the housing resources devolved by central government decreased dramatically in favor of private initiative. In a recent article published in *The Guardian*, Andy Beckett stated that

Thatcherism, in some ways, was a highly skillful exercise in feigned egalitarianism – as indeed is capitalism itself. Right to buy, for all its appealingly inclusive rhetoric, was not a right available to all. Those who could not afford to exercise it tended to be lone parents, younger tenants, people living on their own, or Thatcherism's economic losers: the unemployed or low-skilled.⁶

Against the backdrop of these considerations, we frame more than three decades of policies into three spans: 1945 – 1955, 1955 – 1964, 1964 – 1979. These three decades were not homogeneously ruled, since the United Kingdom saw an alternation of leadership between Labour (17 years) and Tory (17 years). We can assume that the state-driven approach triggered by the Attlee government (1945 – 1951) permeated the policies until the 1980s, as we are going to see.

3 Gerardo Sempere, "Designing the identity," *AGATHÓN – International Journal of Architecture, Art and Design* 01 (2017): 9-14.

4 "What strikes the visitor in recent projects is the attention and the care given to the space outside the dwelling, which for a British citizen is perhaps more important than the interior finishes. Residential construction is the product of a unitary conception of urban planning, which coordinates buildings with pedestrian spaces, roads, urban services, green spaces, shops and schools. The result is generally a humane and peaceful dwelling environment. (...) The house and the residential areas become the most authentic expression of a people's culture." See Michele Chiurini, "L'edilizia residenziale britannica," *L'Industria Delle Costruzioni* 153/154 (1984): 62-69.

5 David Gladstone, *The Twentieth-century Welfare State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press LTD, 1999); Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2002); Margaret Jones and Rodney Lowe (eds.), *From Beveridge to Blair: The First Fifty Years of Britain's Welfare State 1948-1998* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Rodney Lowe, *Welfare State in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2004); Bernard Harris, *The Origins of the British Welfare State: Society, State and Social Welfare in England and Wales, 1800-1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education UK, 2004).

6 See Andy Beckett, "The right to buy: the housing crisis that Thatcher built," *The Guardian* (August 26th, 2015).

Attlee and Churchill: 1945 – 1955

The Britain that emerged from the Second World War was a nation shattered, yet also profoundly optimistic. The results of 1945 London elections saw an unexpected victory for Attlee Labour Party over Tories led by Winston Churchill. The Attlee government (1945 – 1951) experienced a period of relative political and economic consensus. He created the slogan of the “cradle to grave” Welfare State, to express the idea of leading the people towards a more prosperous future for all, which included the establishment of the National Health Service and important public housing policies. It set the basis of housing policies for the future conservative government led by Winston Churchill (1951 – 1955). London experienced a steady increase in the population, as the adopted term “baby-boom” suggests,⁷ and despite the alternation of governments, the role of the public administration remained essential. The Abercrombie *Greater London Plan* of 1944 enlarged the power of the municipality, which, in order to face problems rising from slum conditions housing and bombed areas, was involved in the promulgation of a series of *Housing and Town Act* with the purpose of guiding the transformation of the city. For instance, the Housing Act of 1949 removed the obligation on local authorities to provide housing only for the working classes, marking a turning point in the development of mixed typologies. A key role was played in the early 1950s by Housing Minister Harold MacMillan within the framework of the leadership of Churchill (1951 – 1955), who sought to implement an ambitious plan to build 300,000 houses per year.⁸ The spirit of that period, in a rush against time to provide homes for people, comes out clearly in a booklet published by the Minister of Housing and Local Government, where Macmillan declared:

The people need more homes. They need them quickly. This is the most urgent of all social services. For the home is the basis of the family, just as the family is the basis of the nation. We have to try to meet their needs at a time of great economic difficulty (...) This surely means that we must try to build the greatest possible number of houses out of the available labour and materials. (...) If we can together help to build the People's House in the quantities that People need, we shall have done something to be proud of. We shall deserve, and receive, the gratitude of thousands of our fellow-countrymen, young and old.⁹

During these ten years, despite an equal political alternation, at least in terms of time, housing was developed steadily.

Eden, Macmillan and Home: 1955 – 1964

The second span includes the leadership of three Tory governments, led by Anthony Eden (1955 – 1957), Harold Macmillan (1957 – 1963), and Alec Douglas-Home (1963 – 1964). During these nine years, six of which led by Macmillan who promoted dwelling construction in the second Churchill turn, housing policies never experienced dramatic change. The trend, begun with Attlee, consolidated over time. Indeed, considering the main direction of these leaders, while Eden concentrated on foreign policy, trying to preserve a non-belligerent status, Macmillan fostered domestic employment, and Douglas-Home just practically administrated for one year the condition he inherited from his predecessor.

Wilson, Heath, Wilson, Callaghan: 1964 – 1979

The last span we consider includes three leaderships out of four belonging to the Labour side, with the prominent role played by Harold Wilson, who held the Prime Minister position from 1964 – 70 and from 1974 – 1976. His direction was interrupted by four years under the guidance

⁷ Catherine Bonvalet, Céline Clément and Jim Ogg, *Renewing the family: A history of the baby boomers* (New York: Springer Press, 2015).

⁸ Peter Weiler, “The rise and fall of the conservatives’ ‘grand design for housing’, 1951–64,” *Contemporary British History* 14 (1) (2000): 131.

⁹ Simon Pepper, “The People’s house,” *The Architectural Review* (November 1977): 270; David Kynaston, *Family Britain, 1951–1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009): 54.

of conservative Edward Heath (1970 – 1974), who renovated the administrative structure by reducing the number of local authorities and increasing the number of new metropolitan counties, and then following three years led by James Callaghan (1976 – 1979), who mainly fostered housing programs. Wilson, considered to be part of the soft left wing, increased significantly the construction of council housing. According to the authors, the relationships between social policies and architectural experiences were best expressed during this period, for several reasons. From the Attlee “cradle to grave” state-driven approach set in 1945, the implementation of public housing construction increased steadily and reached its peak in the 1970s, when both the stewardship and the technology benefited from twenty years of practice and applications. Moreover, this time span begins with the establishment of the Greater London Council (GLC), taking the place of former London County Council (LCC). The GLC was the top-tier local government administrative body for Greater London from 1965 to 1986, and underpinned relevant architectural experiences permeated by the Welfare State ideology. An example was the intention to promote alternative settlement models based on the principles of the modern city, such as the Ville Radieuse, as the work by Ernö Goldfinger, an important architect working with the GLC, clearly expresses. His twin towers, the Balfour Tower (1965 – 1967) and the Trellick Tower (1966 – 1972), stress the idea of a democratic park city for everyone.¹⁰ Another case was the renovation of the Covent Garden block by Donald Ball with the Odhams Walk Estate (1979 – 1982), a controversial slum clearance in the core of London. Furthermore, policies outlined in the Parker Morris Report, first conceived in 1961, became compulsory in 1969,¹¹ influencing the development of new typologies according to the new standard, which it basically adapted both in the public sector and on the private market. For such reasons, within this time span, we selected four significant case studies fit to underpin the implications of social policies for the design culture.

Re-shaping society: housing for communities

The condition of London after World War II

London's urban fabric was characterized by low-rise buildings arranged in row typologies, including both the disadvantaged areas in dense central slums and the *suburbia*¹² of the fringe areas, that later became part of the whole urban system. The strong housing tradition, permeating the urban environment before the bombings, deeply influenced the transformations taking place in the following decades. In particular, the typology of the terraced-house as described by Stephan Muthesius was so deeply rooted that it became the basic unit of the urban fabric and also the expression of a social ideology “... given the basic desire of each family to live apart, on a separate piece of ground, the densely built rows of houses seemed the most economical solution.”¹³ The

10 Interviewed for the Sunday Times in 1960 Goldfinger declared: “I would like to see London a park city, and I emphasize not, a garden city.”

11 Chiurini, “L’edilizia residenziale britannica,” 65. The role Parker Morris Report will be deepened in the next paragraphs.

12 Since the Victorian's age, the repercussions of the Industrial Revolution on the urban fabric and social conditions were tangible and made the rising bourgeois class to reproduce “a world of privilege, leisure, and family life that reflected their values.” See Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias. The rise and fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1987), 26.

13 “... But the English row house of the eighteenth and nineteenth century does not just form a row of houses. It is in most cases something more than that: a row has an architectural unity which provides a heightened social image and which speaks of a special achievement on the part of those who planned and built it and those who bought or rented it. The final definition of the terrace is clearly related to practical elements, as well as to social status and to architectural elements. It was, in fact, their effective combination which let the terraced house type continue for so long. Indeed, when the two elements parted, when it was no longer fashionable to live in a terrace, and the villa and the semi-detached house took over as the most desirable types of residence, the terrace was relegated to the lower classes, and after 1920 it was largely phased out even there. Regularity was no longer the result just of style, but also economy.” See: Stephan Muthesius, *The English Terraced House* (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 1982), 11. See also:

success of the Terraced-House, and more generally of the row-house typology, in defining the urban pattern of London represents one key for understanding how the Modern models were interpreted and assimilated, advocating a continuity of spaces between the house and the city, the domestic and the public realms.

The role of the Welfare State policies

The Labour party played a dominant role after World War II, and so they were able to encourage relevant reforms in the administrative and legal framework, creating the fertile ground upon which social policies could grow and reshape many aspects of urban living.¹⁴ The idea of the Welfare State was promoted by authorities at different levels and fostered a significant involvement of the state in the economy, leading to the implementation of the National Health Service and to other benefits to the population. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government was established and promoted both the realization of important public facilities and housing estates. For instance, the Housing Subsidies Act of 1956 introducing a bonus for buildings higher than five stories was intended to increase the density of city housing. This could happen through the demolition and replacement of existing buildings and blocks. Such policies had two huge goals to achieve as quickly as possible: to rebuild the bombed city and to improve the hygienic condition of working-class slums. This, also because of modern construction techniques, led to the realization of housing models based on the serial repetition of elements, such as slabs and towers that started reshaping the city landscape. For instance, small *Unités d'Habitation* and towers appeared in Alton Estates, a housing neighborhood in Roehampton built from 1952 to 1958 by the LCC, breaking with the typical continuity of the surrounding urban fabric. The Alton Estates were intended to represent a desire by some architects to formulate a British version of modernism that was more sensitive to context and referenced a traditional vernacular. However, the risk was to betray both the modern basics by losing its avant-gardist approach, and the local way to accept modern principles, identified as *Englishness*.¹⁵ The urgency of local conditions obscured the important achievements of modernity, turning it into a means to provide the highest amount of homes in a rush against time, exploiting the standardization of the construction process. Another strategy targeted to mitigate the growth of big cities was the urbanization of some parts of the countryside, realizing moderate urban settlements balanced with their rural context. Even if the *Garden City* imagined by Ebenezer Howard¹⁶ as a rural-urban prototype found some implementation, the *New Town Act* of 1946, following the principles stated by Abercrombie's Plan, states the guidelines for the construction of new settlements in the countryside around the main cities, thus witnessing the peculiar British preference for a balanced form of living between the urban chaos and the peaceful countryside.

The role of Parker-Morris Report within the legal framework

The legal framework, which since the second half of the 19th century has continuously been updated according to the standards rising from the new working and living conditions, generated relevant repercussions on the housing typologies. As explained by Roderick, the promulgations of Public Health Acts and the Building Acts evolved following the social ideas of that time, generating "three milestones in the serial of official recommendations and legislation: the Tudor

Arthur Trystan Edwards, *Modern Terraced Houses: Research on High Density Development* (London; John Tiranti, 1946).

14 See Maria Mikaelyan, "Post-war Housing in Great Britain: Historical premises, governmental policies and cultural tendencies" (paper presented at the 4th *International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Science and Arts – SGEM 2017*, Wien, March 28-31, 2017).

15 See: Mark Swenarton, "High Density without High-rise: Housing Experiments of the 1950s by Patrick Hodgkinson," in *Architecture and the Welfare State*, ed. Mark Swenarton et al. (London and New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2015), 252; William White, "The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the making of a Modern International Style, 1927 – 1957," *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009): 441-465.

16 Ebenezer Howard, *Garden cities of to-morrow*, ed. L. Mumford (London: Faber and Faber, 1945).

Walters Report (1918), the Dudley Report (1944), and the Parker Morris Report (1961)."¹⁷ The latter, which became standards in 1969, "laid down minimum living space, heating and amenity standards for council homes, dependent on the type of design and number of occupants intended".¹⁸ The documents were also linked to a system of subsidies, which encouraged financial incentives in the public sector. Even though until 1981 the surface-minimum standards regulated only the public sector, the standards also influenced the private sector which was adapting to the market's demands. These prescriptions and type-plans, firstly conceived as good practice and distributed as design manuals, were elaborated on the basis of the mentioned reports, such as the Parker Morris standard of 1961, which became compulsory in 1969.¹⁹

London as an experimental laboratory of architecture

The new architecture created was the most visible manifestation of the Welfare State, with the designs of new schools, hospitals and houses reflecting the spirit of the age and a belief in progress. However, the introduction of new housing typologies represented a threat to the continuity of the existing urban fabric, as the case of Alton Estate suggests. The relation between the building and the city was to be one of the crucial challenges architects were asked to answer: Do they follow the lessons by Le Corbusier and lose the contact with the ground level? Do they follow the Smithsons' concept of *streets-in-the-air*, like the estates of Robin Hood Garden or Park Hill as a possible compromise? Do they preserve the relations with the street, according to the local tradition like the terraced-house? During the annual Reith Lectures on BBC radio entitled

17 Lawrence J. Roderick, "Design by legislation: The ideological nature of house planning in the United Kingdom, 1918–1961," *Habitat International* 9 (2) (1985): 124.

18 David Crawford, "A Fast-changing Decade," in *A Decade of British Housing, 1963–1973*, ed. David Crawford (London: The Architectural press, 1975), 9.

19 Chiurini, "L'edilizia residenziale britannica," 63.

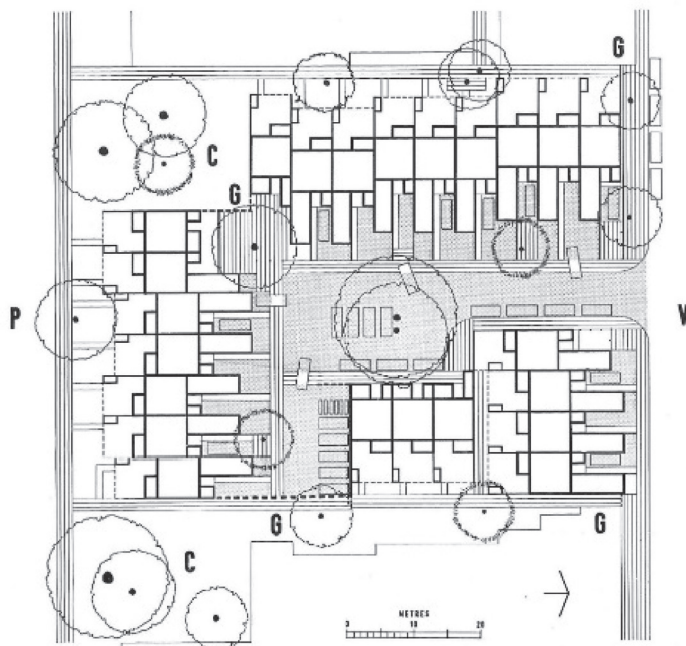


Fig. 2: Layout for houses and the facilities for access, with segregation of vehicular and pedestrian access

The Englishness of English Art, at the end of 1955, the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner argued that “England seems predestined to play a leading part in modern architecture.”²⁰ White explains that the arrival of modernism in England had been firmly resisted by those who saw it as a foreign invasion. By contrast, those like Pevsner, who advocated the adoption of the Modern Movement, made a concerted attempt to establish its English identity. They sought to show that modernism and Englishness were entirely compatible.

It is within this framework that London becomes an architectural experimental lab, through the critical assimilation of architectural models. This period was permeated by a rich theoretical debate²¹ as illustrated by the Smithsons and Team X. The restructured administrations put young architects working inside the Boroughs in the condition of practicing with the lessons of modernism and testing new forms of living, as was clearly the case with the Camden Local Authority. Urban prototypes were tested, and combined with traditional and innovative typologies, leading to the experimentation of new design styles, swinging between the vernacular and the monumental.

High density without high-rise

The studies conducted by Mark Swenarton reveal the strong relations that tie together architectural design and social policies in Britain²². The focus of architectural research shifted on the relational potentialities, of a city fabric marked by dense low-rise buildings, which in post-war London could be tested on the free plots arising from war devastation, determining a jump of scale in the urban patterns. The design culture references were not limited to the Le Corbusian work (such as the Ville Radieuse and the Unité d’Habitation), which experienced a short phase of custom importation, as we saw in Alton Estates. Also included are works by Scandinavians Arne Jacobsen and Jørn Utzon and the Swiss Siedlung Halan by Atelier 5. The huge demand for housing in the aftermath of World War II could suggest the adoption of high-rise typologies, which experienced a real boom in many other European bombed cities. Conversely, in the UK this phenomenon did not take place. In fact, the main issue for British housing remained the high-rise typology, mainly because of the negative perception from the people. Indeed, the Ronan Point disaster (1968) had a tremendous influence on public opinion. A gas leak caused an explosion and consequently the collapse of one corner of Ronan Point, a 22-story tower built in the 1960s using prefabrication techniques. Some even claimed that this episode provoked “a loss of the old faith in the benign role of the state. Architects and planners were no longer trusted to act in the best interest of all,” causing what can be defined as the state retreat from housing.²³ This was far from being the case. However, the event was amplified both by mass media triggering a violent debate, and by the cultural environment, as the production of some movies demonstrated. For instance the horror movie *The Towering Inferno* (1974, USA), directed by Irwin Allen and John Guillermin, the dystopian movie *Fahrenheit 451*, (1966, UK), directed by François Truffaut, set in the above-mentioned Estate of Alton West, the classic *A Clockwork Orange*, (1971, UK) by Stanley Kubrick, set in Thamesmead Estate and based on the novel of the same name by Anthony Burgess (1962), the dystopian *High-rise* (1975), by James Ballard, recently transposed into a movie by Ben Wheatley (2015). The British market refused the tall buildings and experimented with new high-density without high-rise typologies,²⁴ compact housing estates of low or middle-rise. High-density was necessary not only for meeting the demands of that period, but also to encourage social cohesion through the experimentation of shared community lifestyle. Probably, these are the main reasons why high-density is the common feature of most of the estates.

20 William White, “The Englishness of English Architecture,” 441-465.

21 Sibel Bozdoğan, “Modernist Discourse,” *UIA – International Architect Magazine* 5 (1984): 12.

22 See: Mark Swenarton, *Homes Fit for Heroes – The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing in Britain* (London: Heinemann, 1981); Swenarton, “High Density without High-rise,” 238.

23 Nicholas Bullock, “Building the Socialist Dream or Housing the Socialist State? Design versus the Production of Housing in the 1960s,” in *Writing Urban Space*, ed. Liam Murphy Bell, Gavin Goodwin (Winchester, UK and Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2012), 336.

24 Swenarton, “High Density without High-rise,” 237.



Fig. 3: Maiden Lane by Gordon Benson & Alan Forsyth (Camden, 1976-1982)

The doorstep between the private and the public: the narration of the every day. Four housing case studies designed between 1964 and 1979

The cases we are going to present address in different manners the territory between the residential unit and the open street, an ambiguous space between public and private that we can address as *threshold*. In this regard, we can refer to the meaning raising from the word *doorstep*, where

the transitory nature of the passage across an architectural element is formalized in the uncertain space between two places, between two conditions ... the doorstep is the element expressing the every day, the normality of an action regulating, in different ways but equal in the meaning, (...) housing becomes (...) the assemblage of practices and dwelling spaces that go beyond the sphere of the house, in order to stop within a more complex and vague field, the in-between one.²⁵

The threshold is to be considered, in a wider meaning, as a sequence of spaces solving the transition from one condition to another. This happens through the spatial articulation of different architectural fundamentals, such as gates, paths, pavements, entrances, covers, and walls. Distances between them are essential in the determination of the collective housing *comfort* level, as well as in the definition of the intimacy degree and the feeling of belonging.

Maiden Lane Estate by Gordon Benson and Alan Forsyth (1976 – 1982), Camden

Maiden Lane Estate by Gordon Benson & Alan Forsyth (Camden, 1976 – 1982), located within a former rail yard, featuring a more extensive land use according to the principles of high-density and low-rise, is conceived to recreate a sense of community through the architectural definition of some borders and connecting axes. Inner volumes interpret the characteristic row-house dense

²⁵ Eleonora Salsa, *La dimensione del comfort urbano. I luoghi di mediazione tra casa e città abitabile* (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli, 2015), 59. Translation by the author.



Fig. 4: Odhams Walk by Donald Ball (Covent Garden, 1979-1982)

and low-rise tissue, exploiting the sloping topography and defining the private space scheme. The grid is the principle according to which units are combined, drawing a repetition of compact islands and tiny passages. Peripheral buildings perform as rigid and taller masses defining borders and collective spaces for the community. The space of transition between the home and the city seems protected by the disposition of the buildings, which define sequences of open spaces between the domestic and the public realms. Squares, connecting buildings at different levels, are conceived as hearts of the estate, and assume the role of ending points of a complex circulation system. Many scholars find Maiden Lane's antecedent in the Siedlung Halen by Atelier 5.²⁶

Odhams Walk Estate by Donald Ball (1979 – 1982), Covent Garden

A high-density approach also characterizes the Odhams Walk Estate by Donald Ball (Covent Garden, 1979 – 1982). At first glance, it appears as a red bricks block following the urban grid, since the width of the street prevents the observer from understanding the building in its entirety. Upon closer examination, as the view enlarges, the movement of the masses becomes clear, revealing the complexity and the porosity hidden behind the facade. Once the threshold between the street and the inner yards is crossed, the spatiality changes, and, even though material is still the same, cantilevered volumes, terraces and walkways are re-articulated determining a dynamic space. Open spaces melt together with little gardens and low basements; a large number of small staircases connects the ground floor environment with a sequence of small terraces equipped with benches and pausing corner; corridors and even smaller stairs link the apartments to the walkways. This distribution system is imbued with the Le Corbusian idea of the *promenade architecturale*. Accessing the flat becomes not only a functional action, but also an aesthetic experience. The dwelling units share corridors and small terraces, as well as the yards at the ground floor, suggesting a logic of sharing, typical for old neighborhoods or even villages, in sharp contrast with the model of the terraced-house and the feeling of individuality characterizing the

²⁶ Gerardo Semprebon, Wenjun Ma, "Between city and home. Space of transition in London Postwar Housing," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 7 (3) (2018): 264.



Fig. 5: Alexandra Road by Neave Brown (Camden, 1967-1980)

modern society. The block's porosity emphasizes the continuity between the semi-private realm of the inner yards' system and the public domain of the surrounding streets. Nevertheless, it is inappropriate to address this porosity as an extension of the public ground inside the articulated block, since the space at the street level is so tiny that it seems conceived more to protect the dwellers from the urban chaos, rather than encouraging a public use.²⁷

Alexandra Road Estate by Neave Brown (1967 – 1980), Camden

The terraced-house system is the result of the combination of dwelling units side by side in order to preserve the facade's continuity, yet preserving the separation of separate entrances. The reinterpretation of the terraced-house is recognizable in the Alexandra Road Estate by Neave Brown (Camden, 1967 – 1980). In this project, the buildings' disposition defines a pedestrian street and a linear park, both connecting elements working at the urban scale. The suspended street, above the vehicle level, interprets the domestic dimension of the estate, hosting entrances and other space of relation, such as terraces and walkways.

Mark Swenarton writes that

Brown demanded that every dwelling should open directly, without any intermediate or transitional space, into the street network of the city, and at Alexandra Road provided a battery of external stairs expanded versions of the half-flight of stairs leading to the front door of a Victorian terraced house – so that the front door of every dwelling would connect directly to the street.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., 265.

²⁸ Swenarton, "High Density without High-rise," 239.

The project reproduces the same balance between built and open spaces, as well as the distribution. The typical Terraced-House tissue is reinterpreted as a capillary relationship between city and dwelling, preserving the continuity of the urban system and keeping entrances isolated. The linear park, thanks to its large dimensions, become a public element, also connecting the different sides of the context.²⁹

Barbican Estate by Peter Chamberlin, Geoffry Powell and Christof Bon (1965 – 1976), London

In the Barbican Estate, the separation of fluxes and the transition from public to private, made this a protected space within the urban chaos. Reyner Banham, who, after the results of the competition launched in 1951, was closer to the Smithsons' proposal (the Golden Lane Estate), and sharply criticized this project for its "complacent and minimal transgressive modern architecture," wrote that

the Barbican, to put in bluntly, is Britain's largest voluntary ghetto – but not for the reason of high rents alone. It matches in its style and planning, architecture and amenities, what is now the prime educated middle-class dream of a good life in the city.³⁰

According to Fernandez and Mozas

"the plan was to buck the trend, to halt the sprawl and to create structures which could assume the complexity of collective living. They wanted to recreate the solidity of Georgian London, the hustle and bustle of the medieval city and the peace and tranquillity of the suburbs all in one single site and on the scale of a 20th Century metropolis."³¹

In our opinion, what makes the Barbican Estate an interesting case study is the balanced combination of high-rise, one of the few estates featuring this, and middle-rise masses, arranged at different levels, which determine an increasing degree of *comfort* in the transition from the public and the domestic life.

Re-shaping society: public architecture

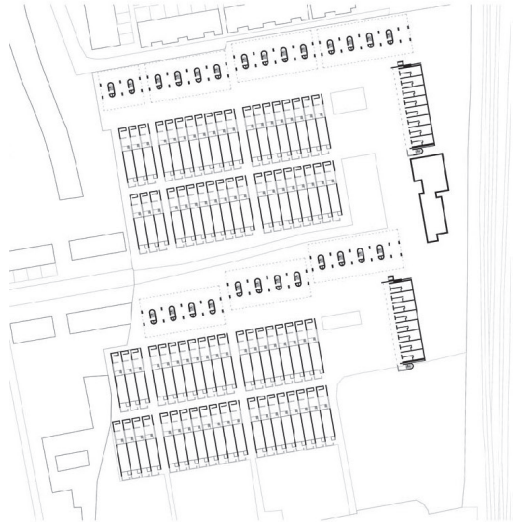
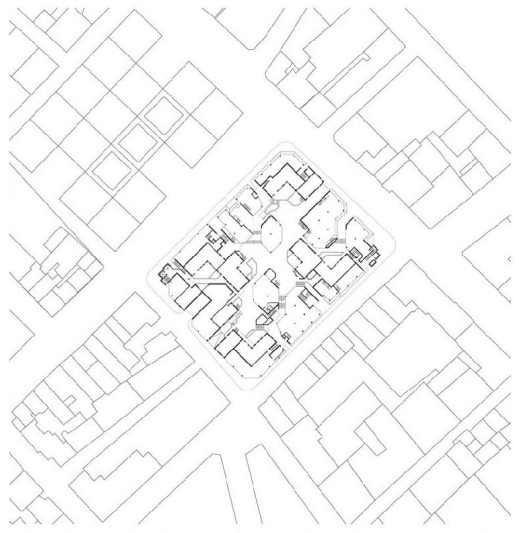
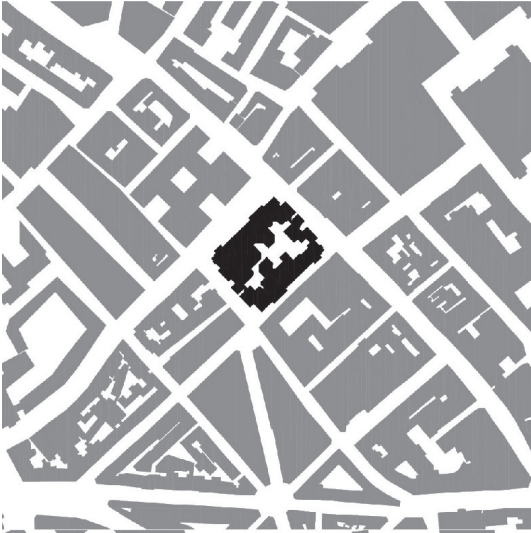
The cultural fervor of the 1960s and the role of the Smithsons.

After the VIII Ciam Congress of 1951 in Hoddesdon, concerning the historical centers, addressed as the *hearts of the city*, the crisis facing Modernism as a universal method to approach architectural and urban design, was intensifying not only in the UK context. In Italy, for example, the realization of the Torre Velasca by BBPR (1956 – 1955) raised a sharp controversy between Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Reyner Banham about the supposed "Italian retreat from Modern Architecture." Against the backdrop of a lively international debate, Peter & Alison Smithson played a significant role in the way modernism had been assimilated by British design culture, generating a unique architectural experience, deeply rooted in contextual relations and, at the same time, able to give shape to the dream of emancipation characteristic of 1960s London. The role of the Smithsons was crucial since they encouraged the *creative class* of that period to accept the European modern design culture combining it with local conditions. The Smithsons' research focused on the necessity of interpreting human relations compared to urban structure. They rejected the zoning as the basic element of modern planning principles, defined in the Athens Charter as the combination of the four primary functions – dwelling, work, recreation, and transport – proposing an approach permeated with the qualitative spatial dimension rather than the functional program. The Smithsons were transferring the artistic feeling of their time into architecture that was facing new challenges. Herbert Read, one of the founders of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, fuelled lively debates between artists of that period, among which the Independent Group's members were to become the most influential current for cultural

29 Semprebon, Ma, "Between city and home," 264.

30 Reyner Banham, "A Walled City. The Barbican in the City of London," *New Society* 629 (1974): 222.

31 Fernandez, *10 stories of collecting*, 272.



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Fig. 6: Figure-ground plans. From left: Alexandra Road, Maiden Lane, and Odhams Walk

Fig. 7: Ground floor plans. From left: Alexandra Road, Maiden Lane, and Odhams Walk

Fig. 8: Sections. From left: Alexandra Road, Maiden Lane, and Odhams Walk

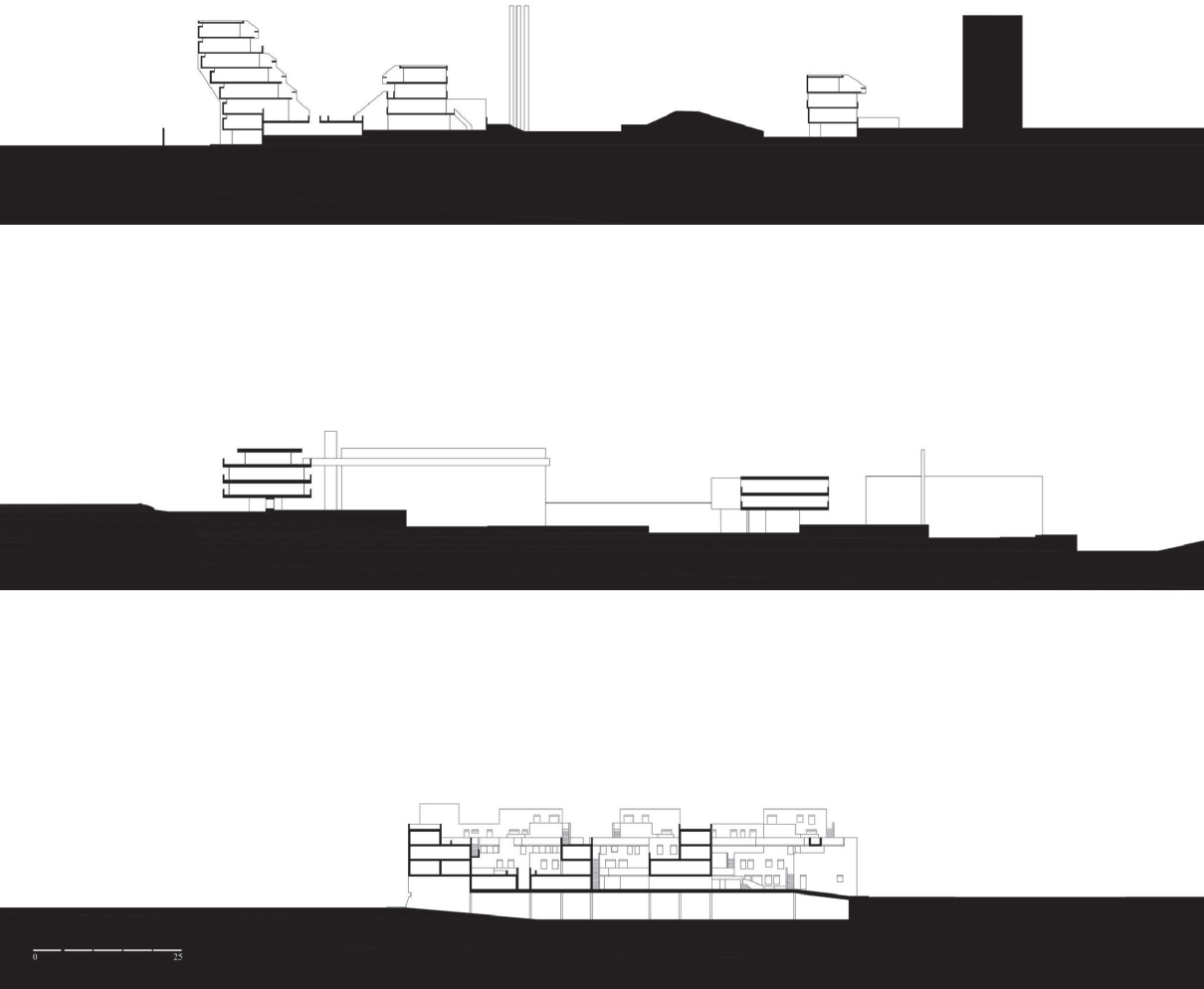




Fig. 9: Barbican Estate by Peter Chamberlin, Geoffry Powell and Christof Bon (1965-1976)

production. Figures like Eduardo Paolozzi, Reyner Banham, Richard Hamilton and Nigel Henderson, following different paths, shared the common idea that contradiction was the new field of exploration for visual arts. Working with collages and other non-conventional techniques, they focused on the ambiguous statute of the object that, ripped from its natural context assumed new meanings. Beauty's aesthetics was overtaken by the new sense of non-art, that of course was to become art itself very soon, anticipating the pop art success, as showed through exhibitions like *Parallel of Life and Art*.³² Nigel Henderson's photographs, within the framework of the Independent Group activity, are shown in some important exhibitions,³³ to demonstrate the need of shifting the interest from function to relation. The idea of *urban re-identification* arises and suggests a renovated and ambiguous relationship between the public and the private realm, between intimate and collective, domestic and urban.

The Royal National Theatre by Denys Lasdun and Peter Softley (1962 – 1976)

The topic of spatial relations is even more remarkable if related to the construction of the Social State, considering both its spatial pattern and its figurative character. Projects like the Finsbury Health Centre (1935 – 1938) by Tecton (Berthold Lubetkin), cultural spaces of South Bank with the Royal Festival Hall (1948 – 1951) by Robert Matthew and Leslie Martin and the Royal National Theatre (1962 – 1976) by Denys Lasdun and Peter Softley are a direct expression of that “Reshaping society” slogan, pursued by administrations over decades. Modern theoretical and technological arguments become tools in architect's hands in order to give shape to the new Social State. For instance, the Royal National Theatre by Denis Lasdun and Peter Softley successfully matches the functional program of culture-related facilities with the urban condition

32 Claude Lichtenstein, Thomas Schregenerberger, (eds.), *As found: the discovery of the ordinary* (Zurich: Lars Muller, 2001), 31.

33 Such is the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition of 1956, held in London Whitechapel Gallery, with the famous collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* by Richard Hamilton. The exhibition had a deep impact on society and specially on the concept of aesthetic, deviating from the one of beauty, giving rise to the Pop Art. Objects started to be conceived with an ambiguous nature, and things torned off from their context acquired new meanings.



Fig 10: The Royal National Theatre (1976). Architect Denis Lasdun and Peter Softley

of South Bank, connecting the different layers of the city with concrete slabs, platforms, terraces and belvederes, that are totally integrated with the architecture. This architecture is a composition of elements strongly related to the surrounding and at the same time isolated, a machine for observing the city and to be looked at. The game of horizontal planes is carefully balanced in its proportions, so that the thickness of each slab becomes the leitmotif of the architectural composition. The program combines spaces for culture, leisure, and circulation, by articulating the theatre's massive volumes, which, at first glance, recall a modern castle with towers. The figurative character is given by the masses' composition, which, with its game of light and shadows, enhances the concrete's expressivity. The building has no main facades, contrasting with theatre's tradition of featuring a clear and representative access, where the audience could proudly meet before the performance. The monumental character that still persists, is attenuated by the circulation system, a large terrace offering a 360° panoramic view, contrasting with the axial perspective, typical character of monumentality. This architecture, matched with the political ideals of its time, articulates a relation with the existing context and at the same time expresses the dreams of shaping the future with places open to everyone.

Conclusions

This paper synthesizes the most relevant aspects of the relations between the social policies and the architectural experiences featured in London during the post-war era. In the first part, we introduced the political condition, intended as a necessary background to understand the state-driven policies, by framing the 34 years between the end of World War II and the defeat of Margaret Thatcher into three distinct time spans. Since the relationships between the social policies and architectural experiences appeared to be best expressed during the last fifteen years (1964 – 1979), we selected this period to investigate four housing estates and one public building. The paper focused on the space of transition between the public and the private realm to suggest how the design culture focused on the human relation when expressing the spirit of that period in architectural forms. On the one hand, the public spaces rejected monumentality, on the other hand, the private ones, like housing, encouraged collective lifestyles. The architecture created

during that period was the most visible manifestation of the Welfare State policies, reflecting the spirit of the age and a belief in progress. When this *imagined future* began to unravel in the 1970s, post-war cityscapes and architecture came under attack. The critique of these buildings concentrated on the apparent disparity between the utopian dreams of the architecture and what played out in reality. However, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the architecture of postwar London, culminating in the production of documentaries, like the movie directed by Tom Cordell *Utopia London* (2015), or the exhibition held at the Architecture Space of Royal Academy *Futures Found, The Real and Imagined Cityscapes of Post-War Britain*, (2017) curated by Victor Buchli, Owen Hopkins, Helen Ikla, Tom Wilkinson, Jules Lubbock and Penny Lewis. Moreover, the syntactic variations on the expressive topics of modernism, turned this era into an important design reference for many contemporary designers. Just to mention some: Grafton Architects recently declared their inspiration looking at Neave Brown's Alexandra Road; and the concept of *street in the air* has been recalled in Steven Holl's Linked Hybrid and Bjarke Ingels' 8 House. Even though adopting different approaches, all case-studies shared another common attribute: the will of establishing a critic relationship with the context, sometimes discontinuous, but never divorced from reality. Despite the distance assumed by the Smithsons regarding the opportunity of master planning design because of its rigid functional distinctions, all the quoted projects' schemes showed the intention of going beyond architectures themselves in the way they match with the urban scale of their surroundings. Architecture met urban planning both designing entire parts of the city and reacting with the specificity of the context. And this is probably one of the most precious legacies of that period. Robin Hood Gardens, from which we started our considerations, was a clear expression of this attitude, imbued of social ideals, trying to express the spirit of the time, and pursuing to relate with the context, even if a weak one.

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- Fig. 1, 5, 9: Photos by Gerardo Semprebon (2017).
- Fig. 2: *Space in the home. Design bulletin 6*. London: Her Majesty's stationery office, Department of the Environment, 1968, 28.
- Fig. 3, 4, 10: Photos by Daniel Rey (2017).
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