

PROBLEMS WITH EASY STREET: AT THE SMITHSONS' 'ROBIN HOOD GARDENS ESTATE' FOR OPEN HOUSE WEEKEND, SUNDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2006

By Nicholas Beech



I walked down Poplar High Street with my partner on a bright September afternoon to see an exhibition at Robin Hood Gardens Estate. Poplar is an uncared for area of London to the north of Canary Wharf – uncared for not in the sense that nobody cares, the people who live there certainly do, but in the sense that nobody from outside has ever cared, or it seems so when you're walking between the A13 and A102. Number One Canada Square both looms large and stands distant on the horizon here, reminding visitors of the problems caused by the construction of 'zones', 'districts' or artificial 'quarters' – the city of the patchwork quilt that is either never quite stitched up, or is perhaps stitched up good 'n' proper.

That the city should be broken up into sites of industry, of commerce, of leisure, and of home, was

vociferously argued against by the architects of Robin Hood Gardens, Alison and Peter Smithson, who saw such a planning practice as anti-humanist and abstract, a mistake that created dead space and fearful environments. Their housing models of the 1950s and 1960s looked to the organic growth of the 'traditional' city street for inspiration, proposing 'streets in the sky', a humanist vision of old fashioned 'families' married to a concrete modernity. Robin Hood Gardens was to be the realisation of their proposition, and on its completion in 1972 was treated as a test of whether they were right. Pretty much everyone agrees that they pretty much weren't.

Back in that bright sunshine, my partner encouraged me to stop being 'a bit lost but sure where I am' and ask someone which way the building was.

Before reaching a large group of smart young men, clearly at a family do, I bumped into a group of older men, who seemed to be dressed as ramblers, clutching the same bright green pamphlet produced by ‘Open House Weekend’ (an organisation whose aim is to ‘promote better understanding of architecture and the built environment across all sections of the community’) that I knew was on my desk at home. They pointed to the end of the street and added – ‘make sure you go inside the flat, it’s the best bit!’



On sight of the estate I hoped so. The building stands by Cotton Street (a busy road that joins the aforementioned A13 and A102) surrounded by high concrete walls and a moat – a castle for the 213 flats that the estate consists of. This was proposed by the Smithsons as a way of blocking out the noise and pollution of Cotton Street, which was to contrast with the quiet but busy bustle of their streets in the sky. The block seems from the ground to be both too high and too crude to work in such a way, but it looks good in an apocalyptic and ‘I’m just visiting with my green pamphlet for the afternoon’ way.

This part of the ‘Open House Weekend’ had been organised by the architectural practice ‘erect architecture’ (architects Barbara Kaucky and Susanne Tutsch in association with Ashley McCormick) who have shown for some time now an interest in communities who live within high-density housing schemes. The weekend was the culmination of a string of projects that asked the community of Robin Hood Gardens to engage in their building – by all accounts to mixed success. Like any other issue in a community (entertainment, economy, clothing, etc.) different people have different views, and Robin Hood Gardens excites like Marmite. Tough, but erect architecture’s intention was not to provide a shiny happy people showcase for visitors, but to ask questions about how people live and want to live. What visitors did get was a small bric-a-brac sale, some biscuits, ‘street bingo’, a fantastic recipe book (a truly catholic collection including anything from ‘Thai Mai chicken’ to ‘Packet

of Maltesers from the shop’) and a grim sense of Victorian voyeurism. What the visitors wanted to see was ‘inside the flat!’



This disconcerting sense of middle-class spying on ‘the proles’ returned the problem of the Smithsons’ intentions and those of architects in the post-Second World War era in general. The patriarchal provision of ‘good housing’ (however softened by Alison Smithson’s ‘feminising’ detailing of the concrete, as suggested by one of the resident volunteers) can never satisfy the realities of daily life. A building does, in the end, only stand or fall down; the experience of it is conditioned by the events and activities that are conducted in and around it – the smell of piss in the public stairwell in contrast with the brightly coloured saris of many of the women, said as much. It remained surprising to me that the Smithsons, who had avowed such a dislike of ‘zoning’, had nevertheless provided a building in which the only type of space was either a home or ‘outside’ – where were the shops, the pubs, the workshops, the offices?



Leaving the 'streets' and entering the flat was, at the time, a great joy. The interior evidenced the accumulation of many years of celebrations, family joys and upsets, and football loyalty (Toon Army, I whispered). I felt both honoured and unnerved at the generosity of someone who would allow streams of building twitchers to come rambling through their home, muttering about the 'quality of Alison's interior detailing, and handling of materials'. I was surprised at first, on entering the living room, to find that same person sat with her granddaughter watching the telly. No one said hello. I was pleased when able to strike up a conversation about her 78s (a technology her granddaughter was unable to grasp the concept of, whilst texting on her mobile), and delighted to have an, all too brief, dance to David Whitfield.

also, necessarily, their lives. This places erect architecture, the architect, in a far more complex relationship with their clients, the residents, than is usual practice because they are not working 'for', but 'with' them. This requires constant negotiation and translation as erect architecture share their expertise, undermining the security or (perhaps more positively) transforming the reality, of their authority. The clearest message from the Open House weekend is that learning from this demands more than provision or observation from the outside.

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It is commendable that Open House supports projects, like that of erect architecture's, that attempt to involve people in their own environment. That, for so long and still, people are expected to spontaneously commit to buildings that have been provided 'for them' by public authorities or private speculators demonstrates how disjointed most thinking on human experience really is. I would add, that the project does not suit visitors seeking architectural attractions: 'studying cultures', dressed as 'celebrating' them or not, is part of the problem. Projects such as these would be far better translated into sustained educational programmes, and (the dream) so get to a condition in which local people can start to make pro-active choices about their own landscape.

Communities are not formed by people living next to each other, but by social bonds built from exchange, shared experience and participation in common practices. This has 'traditionally' arisen not from 'the street', but from places such as workplaces, markets, the church, unions, and societies. erect architecture have endeavoured to engage a group of people in the architecture not only of their building but