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CAN ARCHITECTURE CAUSE SOCIAL DYSFUNCTION? A GLIMPSE INTO POST WAR SOCIAL HOUSING IN BRITAIN.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I aim to explore the success of social housing and argue whether the problems surrounding present day social housing are due to architectural design or other factors. To do this, I will compare notable housing projects in London; Robin Hood Gardens, the Aylesbury Estate and the Barbican Estate and evaluate whether the effects of class segregation can have an impact on the living conditions of the inhabitants. To do this, I have examined their design factors, notable aspects and published comments from occupants.

POST WAR RISE IN SOCIAL HOUSING

In the post-war era, social housing was in high demand as a result of the destruction that took place in WW2. Around 450,000 homes had been destroyed by bombing. It was estimated that 750,000 new homes were needed and another 500,000 to replace existing slums. (Boughton p. 90) Large areas of slum housing was demolished due to the 1930 Housing Act which deemed conditions unsuitable. This paired with a rapidly growing population led to an emergence of architects promoting utopian ideals. Local councils gave them permission to redefine Britain's housing typologies, thus the divisive style of brutalist architecture emerged, characterized by its geometric, rough appearance and the use of raw concrete.

ROBIN HOOD GARDENS

DESIGN INTENTION

My first case study is Robin Hood Gardens. Robin Hood Gardens, situated in Poplar, East London, and designed by Alison and Peter Smithson for the Greater London Council was constructed in 1972. This is estate is controversial and highly debated due to factors such as its polarizing design and its levels of crime. It is currently in the process of demolition.

The brutalist estate houses 214 spacious, well-lit flats. 38 are ground floor flats intended for the elderly, and the remaining are a range of two-to-six-bedroom maisonettes for the population of around 700. The building was a response to Le Corbusier's rue interieur concept used in Unité d'Habitation (1952). They envisioned a "streets in the sky" utopia and created elevated walkways that could encourage residents to socialise, surrounded by fresh air away from the traffic below. The Smithson's also implemented noise reducing features by facing the bedrooms and kitchens inwards and creating large concrete "acoustic barriers" (fig. 1) around the estate.

Figure 1 – The concrete "acoustic barriers"

Figure 2 Bronze mullions on the Seagram Building

Another feature used to reduce noise were the concrete fins on the façade of the building, a nod to Mies van der Rohe's bronze mullions featured on the Seagram Building. (fig.2) Furthermore the Smithson's added that a "stress free zone" was created from the debris of the previous Victorian homes that were bombed on the site. The rubble was resourcefully heaped into a large mound in the centre of the housing estate and covered in grass so children could play on it. (fig. 3) Kitchens were designed to face the garden zone so mothers could keep an eye on their children while they played in that area. (Johnson, 1970)

Figure 3 – An Air Raid Warden and his dog survey devastation from a bombing raid in Poplar East London, Children playing cricket in the 1970's, The mound

The Smithson's first devised their 'streets in the sky' concept in their entry for the 1951 Golden Lane Competition. Hence, some argued that by the time the building was erected in 1972, modernism had already phased out. Even more surprising that by 1966, the Smithson's themselves had strayed from their earlier raw Brutalist style to a more softer approach to

design. Critics observed that 'it was already becoming apparent that high rise, deck access living produced more problems, both social and practical, than it solved.' (Peter Stewart Consultancy, 2007, p.9 cited Webster 1997) Thus, it's surprising how the concept of Robin Hood Gardens even came to be.

Anthony Pangaro, an American architectural critic, argued that 'the built reality of Robin Hood Gardens is less convincing than the theory behind it'. He believed the 'pause places' allowed no definition of private territory or any sense of belonging to individual occupants'. Pangaro also described the lifts as badly defaced and vandalized. (Hobhouse, 1994) The "stress free zone" was also criticised with one critic describing it as, 'a setting for the buildings than as a useful recreational area for the tenants.' (Hobhouse, 1994)

NOTABLE ASPECTS

There were many issues surrounding the design and location of Robin Hood Gardens. Firstly, the estate was surrounded by busy roads such as the Blackwall Tunnel approach, causing noise and air pollution. The concrete "acoustic barriers" implemented to reduce the noise pollution were unsightly and weathered badly. Moreover, turning the building inwards inadvertedly created an the estate that was isolated from the wider community. Furthermore, the concept of 'streets in the sky' was faced with much criticism. Unlike Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, Robin Hood Gardens' walkways were narrower and external instead of within the building. They were considered too narrow to be utilized as actual streets where people could socialise. And contrasting from an authentic city street, the walkways did not lead to anywhere and ended in an above ground dead end. This led to a lack of pedestrian activity thus, crime could flourish.

Despite some criticism of its design, societal issues such as classism can influence Robin Hood Gardens quick deterioration. Renovation never took place, and like many social housing projects, the building received a lack of maintenance for years. In a 2006 survey, the estate was found to be in poor condition, and in a 2007 study it was estimated that it would cost £70,000 per flat to bring them up to the Government's Decent Homes Standard. (Boughton, 2014)

SOCIAL COMMENT

In 2008, Tower Hamlets Council surveyed residents to determine the fate of Robin Hood Gardens. It revealed that more than 75% of residents wanted to see Robin Hood Gardens demolished. (BBC, 2008) This survey was controversial as some commentators and residents believed it was not carried out properly. Robin Hood Gardens was very multicultural and had a large Bangladeshi community. The 2011 census revealed that only 9% of residents were of white ethnicity and 49% of residents were immigrants. (Wired Ltd, 2020)

In an article published in Building Design magazine, local Conservative councillor Tim Archer, accused Tower Hamlets Council of intentionally ignoring maintenance issues so residents would be driven out, making way for the new development. (Building Design, 2009) Moreover, Building Design independently surveyed the residents, and it was found in fact that 80% of the residents did not want Robin Hood Gardens demolished, but instead refurbishment and better housing conditions –problems which cannot be attributed to design. Irrespective of these findings, Tower Hamlets Council finally confirmed demolition in 2012.

Demolition began in 2017 to make way for the £300 million Blackwall Reach regeneration programme. They plan to deliver 1,575 homes on the site, but only 50% of those homes will be "affordable housing". (Blackwall Reach Community, 2016) "Affordable" housing is a debatable term, Tower Hamlets Council calculated that a four-person household would require an income

of £48,464 to afford the aptly named 'affordable' rent of a two-bed property. Although, the median household income in the borough was estimated at just £28,199. (Boughton, 2014) As a result, many tenants will have to depend on housing benefits to survive.

In a case study published by The Big Issue magazine, one resident was offered £178,000 by the council for her two-bedroom flat at Robin Hood Gardens, while the average price for a property of the equivalent in Poplar is £347,000. If she accepted a shared ownership proposal, it would be seven years before she regained full ownership. (Forrest, 2016)

EVALUATION

Despite Robin Hood Gardens inception during a time where modernist architecture was on the decline, I believe the more prevalent issue surrounding its failure is the neglect from local authorities. One could argue that the neglect and deterioration of Robin Hood Gardens is what the council intended all along. Firstly, the method in which Tower Hamlets Council surveyed the residents dubious. English was not a first language for many residents, which raises the question of how ethically the survey was executed. Furthermore, with land in London increasingly becoming more profitable, building large-scale, high-density housing estates which cater primarily to private buyers and renters can be more lucrative, as opposed to social housing. Moreover, the guise of "affordable" housing is anything but, as the rent for affordable housing schemes is usually greater than social housing. I believe this, combined with displacement, disadvantages them considerably more than remaining in Robin Hood Gardens. In all, Robin Hood Gardens is a microcosm of the gentrification and social cleansing effecting social housing in the UK.

THE AYLESBURY ESTATE

DESIGN INTENTION

A London estate experiencing similar class cleansing is The Aylesbury Estate in South-East London. (fig. 4) The estate was designed by architect Hans Peter "Felix" Trenton as part of Southwark Councils slum clearance policy. 2,700 flats, in 16 'snake blocks' were designed to house roughly 10,000 residents and built using Parker Morris standards which allowed generous space standards. The Large Panel System of prefabricated blocks were used to construct the site. (Boughton, 2014) This estate also featured 'streets in the sky' which linked the blocks together. On the decks there was space for shops and other amenities, and space was left within the blocks for play areas. All traffic and garages were below, features very similar to Robin Hood Gardens.

Construction spanned nearly ten years and it officially opened in 1970. Right away, the estate was faced by criticism. Parallel to Robin Hood Gardens, The Aylesbury Estate was opened during the 1970s, a time where modernism had fallen out of favour with critics. Moreover, the collapse of Ronan Point 1968 added to the negative public opinion surrounding high density buildings.

East London Mercury, reporter Roy Cooper called the Aylesbury the 'greatest housing disaster in the country,' describing the project as an 'atrocity,' and a 'monstrous hell.' (cited in Romyn, 2020) Architectural theorist, Oscar Newman, added, 'It's almost as if creatures from another world had come down and built their own environment.'

Figure 4 Exterior of the Aylesbury Estate

NOTABLE ASPECTS

The estate had notable design flaws such as the concealed entrances, crumbling concrete and low quality finishings. The estates architects acknowledged this, blaming issues on a lack of appropriate funding from the government. They stated:

> *"There is little doubt that the public areas are the least successful part of the Development…The extensive areas of bare concrete, asphalt, and cheap obscured glass, contribute to the overall feeling of low cost Local Authority housing, and it is almost an insult to the many tenants who are proud of their homes…It is essential that adequate financial backing should now be given to put these deficiencies right. Failure to do so will result in the Estate rapidly becoming a slum." (cited in Boughton, 2020)*

In 1998, Southwark Council was promised £56m of government funding to help transform the estate. A proposal was made to demolish most of the estate and start again, building an extra 1,000 apartments, to be sold to private buyers, in order to raise additional funding. Ownership of the rental properties would be transferred from the council to Horizon Housing Group. In 2001, residents on the estate were balloted on this proposal. 76% of residents participated in the ballot and 73% voted against the regeneration scheme. (Beckett, 2016) Despite the objection, demolition has taken place, resulting in protests resisting the regeneration and privatisation of social housing. (fig 4,5)

It was evident the Aylesbury Estate was impaired by long term cuts to social housing and lack of investment, thus deterioration developed. Southwark Council blamed its decline on its design rather than the fabric of the estate. Notably, in a 2014 Public Inquiry, Southwark Council's in-house architect, Catherine Bates largely blamed Aylesbury's faults on bad urban design principles. She established that, "the condition of the buildings does not, itself present a case for demolition and redevelopment" instead, "the fundamental issue is the estate layout and the poor urban environment this presents" (Southwark Council, 2014)

SOCIAL COMMENTS

Interestingly, the opinions of critics, reporters and architects differ remarkably from the residents. First impressions of the estate were largely positive. Derek Way (a resident for over 41 years) moved in with his family in 1970, in Aylesbury's Chiltern block. He enthusiastically described it, 'like moving into a palace.' Additionally, Julia Lindmeyer, who lived in the Taplow block, noted, 'I liked the spaciousness of the rooms... And the wonderful views we enjoyed from the twelfth floor.' (cited from Romyn, 2020) Thus, the residents spatial experience differed in comparison to an outsiders. (fig

Figure 5 Interior of the Aylesbury Estate

Aylesbury Estate was the backdrop of Tony Blair's first speech as Prime Minister, where he speaks of the "forgotten people" of council housing. Tony Blair's successor, David Cameron shared his same sentiment, writing 19 years later in The Sunday Times:

> *"Within these so-called sink estates, behind front doors, families build warm and welcoming homes. But step outside in the worst estates and you're confronted by concrete slabs dropped from on high, brutal high-rise towers and dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals and drug dealers."*

Irrespective of these comments, many residents felt a sense of community within the Aylesbury Estate and did not want to leave. (fig) Beverley Robinson, who moved to the estate in 1988, reminisces: "I made some of my closest friends hanging around in the laundries. I used to go clubbing with them." Robinson opposed the regeneration scheme and believed it was

Southwark Council's intention to let the Aylesbury Estate become dysfunctional. She adds, 'Making it look as terrible as possible is a way for the council to say: 'This estate can't be saved.' (cited from Beckett, 2016)

Figure 6 "Public housing not private profit" graffiti on Aylesbury's now demolished Chiltern House

Figure 7 Tenants and campaigners, including Aysen Dennis, Margot Lindsay, Victoria Biden, and Piers Corbyn, protesting against privatisation of the Aylesbury Estate

The process of regeneration had a clear negative impact on residents' mental wellbeing. Some residents, knowing that they are being faced with displacement, experienced detachment from their homes. One resident stated, "When they announced that they wanted to demolish the place … it changed things for me, in a sense that I didn't feel as inspired to decorate and to keep the place. Like, it doesn't look like it did… I let it go a certain amount. I didn't deliberately let it go I felt like, you know, I had this thing hanging over my head." (cited in Lees and White, 2019)

An article in the Southwark News concurred:

> *"...the huge impact living among empty homes and next to a giant building site on residents who remain is huge. The project is decades in the making and it was entirely foreseeable that*

> *antisocial behaviour and crime would flourish after the diggers first came in. We've seen this happen before – in the Heygate. Once properties are empty and boarded up it creates a feeling of abandonment, and for the people who still call the estate home; isolation… Focusing too much on the next ten, 20, and 30 years of the estate's future is ignoring the people living on it right now, and what they deserve."* (Southwark News, 2021)

The council provided residents compensation for moving out, but the amount was massively undervalued compared to the asking prices of nearby properties. Southwark Council offered homeowners a list of valuers to provide them an independent valuation of their homes. However, a FOIA request by one resident showed the suggested valuers were actually employees of the council. (Jones, 2017)

EVALUATION

The Aylesbury Estate was frequently used as a prop by politicians and vilified in the media, that it was synonymous crime and deprivation. So much so that it was notoriously described as "hell's waiting room". But all the noise from the media, politicians and the architectural critics drowned out the voices of those that matter the most: the residents who live there. The multiple interviews from residents revealed it was a tight knit community, and they appreciated the spaciousness and design of their homes. Additionally, despite its stereotype for crime and disorder, the crime rates of the estate correlated to the rate surrounding its location. (Boughton, 2020)

Although it wasn't perfect, (the architects themselves admitted it had its downfalls related to its design), many residents felt it was an upgrade from their home's prior. So, to be forced out of their homes and compensated less than their homes are worth is unjustifiable.

The nearby Heygate Estate was demolished in a similar manner. Architecture firm Gensler found that renovating of the estate would have actually cost £17m less than the amount Southwark Council spent on emptying the flats. (Meaker, 2015) Thus, it is clear the council have prioritized profit over people. So, like Robin Hood Gardens, residents of the Aylesbury are met with the same fate of displacement.

Figure 8 Signage on the Aylesbury Estate

THE BARBICAN ESTATE

The Barbican estate, alongside both previous examples of social housing, was built during the post-war era. But unlike these examples, the Barbican is generally a revered example of brutalist architecture while the others are presented as a failure. Why?

DESIGN INTENTIONS

The Barbican estate is a Grade II listed building in the City of London. Clients City of London Corporation commissioned architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon to design the estate in the 1950s. The project was constructed in 1969 on a site that had been previously bombed during World War II. The building officially opened in 1982 by Queen Elizabeth II who declared it, "one of the wonders of the modern world". (Barbican.org.uk, 2020). The 40-acre estate houses over 4,000 residents, living in over 2,014 flats. With many amenities, the Barbican features: The Barbican Arts Centre, a public library, the Museum of London, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and the City of London School for Girls. City of London Corporation's aim was to attract residents to the City after World War II by transforming the Barbican into a cosmopolitan area.

NOTABLE ASPECTS

Unlike Robin Hood Gardens and Aylesbury Estate, the Barbican is a private estate, housed in one of the wealthier boroughs of London. The estate has an army of caretakers and porters, and service charges range from £1,700 to £16,000 a year. (Wiles, 2016). Wealthy residents can afford to spend thousands annually on the upkeep, as opposed to local authorities which fund the council estates. Additionally, with the many amenities the Barbican possesses, it is essentially a tourist attraction. Residents benefit from these as steady profits go back into sustaining the estate.

Due to Margaret Thatcher introducing the 'Right to Buy' scheme in the Housing Act of 1980, renters we able to buy their homes from the council for a discounted price. Although the Barbican was intended for middle class renters, so rent was not subsidised, the City of London Corporation was still essentially a local authority. As a result of this, the majority of homes were sold to private owners and landlords. In 2004, the average price for an apartment was just over £350,000. During the recession of 2009, it had risen to almost £507,000. In 2015 the average was £951,786, an increase of 16.6 per cent year-on-year (2013/14), outperforming the London average of 11.3 per cent. (Bloomfield, 2015) Today, the average value of a property in the Barbican estate has nearly doubled to £1,702,815. (Foxtons, 2021)

Estate agent Frank Harris projects the Barbican homes to rise further in value. 'Even if you don't like the architectural style, once you are inside, the flats are amazing with floor-to-ceiling windows and, because it is concrete, you can't hear anything. There is a lot to like about them.' (Bloomfield, 2015) (fig. 9)

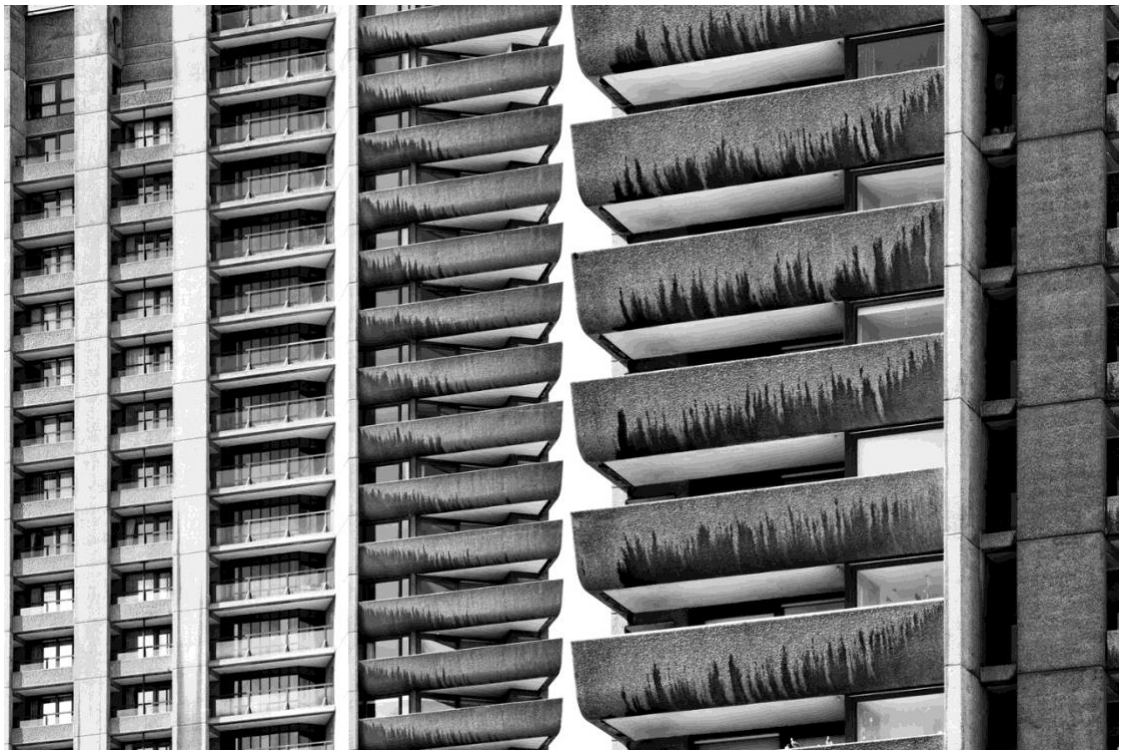

Figure 9 The concrete exterior of the Barbican Estate

SOCIAL COMMENT

The Barbican receives generally positive reception from residents and critics alike. Architect Alan Wright considers the Barbican as one of London's best designed schemes, due to its

innovative layout. He says, “Positioning services and the kitchen on the internal side of the apartment enabled all the principal rooms to be pushed to the edge to maximise views.” (cited in Bloomfield, 2019) Ian Swale, a former resident of the Barbican noted, “You walk in and immediately you notice the sound levels drop. It is quiet. You can hear the birds singing, and it is not like anywhere else.” He remarks on how well built and generous the rooms are, and high quality of the finishes. (fig 5) “There was no skimping, no chipboard, the window frames are solid teak,” says Swale. (cited in Bloomfield, 2019) Contrasting, from The Aylesbury Estate which notably had lower quality finishes due to the lower level of funding, The Barbican was an example of luxury living.

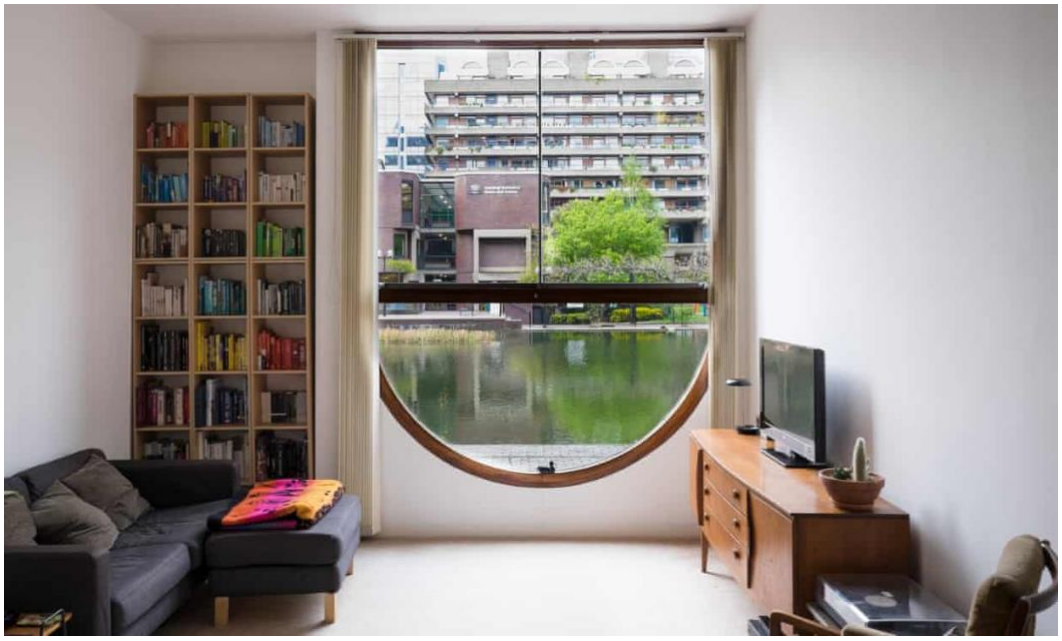

Figure 10 Interior of the Barbican

EVALUATION

Interestingly, these features present in the Barbican Estate are admired but unfavourable when demonstrated in social housing estates and used as excuse to tear them down. Evidently, the Barbican estate’s longevity is due to the effort that goes into its upkeep. The same can’t be said for Robin Hood Gardens and The Aylesbury Estate. As the Barbican Estate was intended for professionals and had a premium rate, City of London could afford to provide more funding, compared to that of social housing. Moreover, with the incorporation of a theatre, arts centre, cinema and music hall, further profits back into sustaining the estate. Paired with the addition of Grade II listed status, it cements its preservation. Maybe if the brutalist Robin Hood Gardens and The Aylesbury Estate had these same circumstances, their fate could have been different?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I believe that the regeneration is a greater threat to social housing than it's architecture. These palatable terms of 'regeneration' and 'decanting' mask what is essentially cleansing of the lower classes.

Although I believe that design can have an impact on inhabitants, the class segregation and neglect of social housing is a greater factor. The lack of funding towards social housing leads to the disrepair and dysfunction of them. This in turn develops to the current trend of displacement and class cleansing of residents, which further impacts them.

It's misguided to blame the faults of post war social housing solely on its modernist design, admittedly there were flaws, but many residents liked the spaciousness of their dwellings and felt it was an upgrade from their previous housing. Crime was undoubtedly a problem, but it was shown that the levels of crime correlated with the surrounding areas, so that can't be solely attributed to design.

I believe the attack on the brutalist architecture of post war social housing is mainly due to the fact that it is so politicized by the media and politicians. Politicians and PMs have successfully painted a picture of poverty and decay surrounding this type of social housing. This is merely to score political points, at the detriment of the inhabitants who experience these buildings first-hand. Their opinions of their homes differ greatly. Through reading the many interviews of the residents of social housing, although they admit there is downfalls, many feel there is a sense of community in these estates and would rather remain than be displaced.

If these politicians and local councils' interests were genuinely in reducing crime and deprivation, I believe the more suitable option would have been to refurbish estates instead of bulldozing them and replacing them with expensive, glitzy apartments intended mainly for the middle class and disguised as "affordable" housing.

I propose retainment and refurbishment of existing structures as opposed to the demolition. This in turn halts the displacement and class cleansing which is currently negatively impacting the working class. I also believe society needs to collectively treat council housing simply as what it is: housing - stripped of fetishization and politicisation. Therefore, the working class who inhabit them are no longer pushed to the forefront of hot topics/debates and treated merely as a spectacle.

I also believe that less issues of design would occur if architects collaborated with current residents in their proposals and design process. ELEMENTAL's 'Quinta Monroy' (2003) is a clear example of how social housing can positively impact residents and the most vulnerable, without the need to displace them. Elemental's collaboration with residents during the design process gave them a sense of involvement and individuality. Moreso, by giving families agency to pick neighbouring properties preserved relationships, lessening the effects of social fragmentation and isolation.

To conclude, with the success of the Barbican, a private, middle-class housing estate, in contrast to Robin Hood Gardens and The Aylesbury Estate, it leads me to believe the issue surrounding post-war estates is not the architecture itself, but the communities that encompass them. By way of collaboration with architects and an appropriate government funding, maybe in the future we will see more focus on enriching communities instead of tearing them apart.

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