

The Case of Robin Hood Gardens

22 June 2015, 14.00 – 18.00

B17 Lecture Theatre, 1-19 Torrington Place, UCL

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The Twentieth Century Society has put forward a new bid for the heritage listing of Robin Hood Gardens, in Poplar, East London. Whilst Historic England considers its recommendation to the Secretary of State, this seminar will be used as a final public effort to summarise the different arguments for listed status before the decision is made regarding the future of the estate.

13.45 Registration

14.00 Introduction

14.15 – 15.30 Session 1 “The Changing Notion of Home through Robin Hood Gardens”

Chaired by Adrian Forty

- Paper 1: Alan Powers
- Paper 2: Catherine Croft
- Paper 3: Sarah Wigglesworth
- Discussion with David Crowley, Alan Powers, Catherine Croft, Sarah Wigglesworth

15.30 – 16.00 Coffee/tea break

16.00 – 17.30 Session 2 “The Role of Art in the Demo vs Refurb debate”

Chaired by Jane Rendell

- Paper 1: Jessie Brennan
- Paper 2: Susanne Tutsch
- Paper 3: Judit Ferencz
- Paper 4: Mark Lemanski
- Discussion with Jessie Brennan, Susanne Tutsch, Judit Ferencz

17.30 – 18.00 Final discussion chaired by Murray Fraser

18.00 Reception

Papers

Alan Powers - Robin Hood Gardens – whose side are you on?

The paper will explore the conflicting causes involved in determining the future of Robin Hood Gardens. Each interest group may claim to speak on behalf of the residents, but all have other motives. Without listing, demolition is certain, and the community is likely to be dispersed. From the angle of architectural heritage, the continuation of the building in use as social housing may be desirable, but is largely irrelevant to the official criteria involved. The notoriety achieved by Robin Hood Gardens from 2007 onwards after the threat of demolition became known was an indication that old prejudices against social housing and the architecture of the Welfare State remain divisive, while intellectualism in architects is widely mistrusted. On the other side, the conservation cause was perhaps weakened in the eyes of officialdom by the apparent knee-jerk response on behalf of the building and its architects, regardless of other evidence.

While we may wish to keep existing social housing in its original use, and we may wish to preserve important examples of post-war architecture, these are different aims that only occasionally overlap.

Sarah Wigglesworth – A Pragmatic View

Sarah's paper will take a pragmatic view of the reasons why we might wish to save Robin Hood Gardens. Concentrating on the importance of its communal life, carefully grown over a number of decades,

she will illustrate her talk with proposal made by her practice, SWA. This seeks to adapt the flats to its occupants' needs, add density to the site without compromising the architects' vision and make the buildings more environmentally resilient. She hopes to show that by taking sustainability seriously, viable alternatives exist that will avoid demolition and resist the dominance of capital in the development equation.

Jessie Brennan - A Fall of Ordinariness and Light

Much has been said and written about Robin Hood Gardens. However, debates around the estate's perceived architectural successes and social failures have often focused only on the buildings – on their need for preservation or demolition, depending on which way you look at them – rather than the thoughts and feelings of the people living within the blocks. They have often tended to ignore, and at worst misrepresent, the experiences of the people who have come to know the buildings most intimately. In this talk I will present my recent project *Regeneration!* (the outcome of which takes the form of a forthcoming publication and includes the work *A Fall of Ordinariness and Light*, 2014, commissioned by the Foundling Museum) which explores with residents the personal impacts of redevelopment and questions who the regeneration is for.

Susanne Tutsch - *Streetlife in Robin Hood Gardens. An attempt to re-charge the void.*

Opened in 1972, Robin Hood Gardens was conceived as housing model for the future featuring 'streets-in-the-air': Wide access decks were designed to enable street life and facilitate encounter and community formation. 'Streetlife' was an event organised in Robin Hood Gardens estate leading up to and during Open House London in 2006. At a time when the estate had a reputation for being troubled, but had not yet been earmarked for redevelopment, the project invited the residents to reconsider their environment in order to imagine different sorts of living. The interventions were site-specific and critically, socially and spatially engaged. At the core of the Streetlife project was an interest in different mechanisms, which aid the preserving, destruction and regeneration of social space. The project explored principles, which can be used in regeneration without changing the physical fabric of the building, not only because this is often a costly process, but also because a changed physical fabric not necessarily equals improvement if social aspects are not addressed. The interest of the project was the (then) present, influenced by and based on architectural form, with a focus on aspects of occupancy.

Judit Ferencz – *How can illustration visualise layers of history and inhabitation of Robin Hood Gardens?*

Falkutatás is a monument protection method developed in Hungary in the 1960s. It applies the horizontal periodisation of archaeological stratigraphy to the vertical, still-standing walls of historical buildings. The fundamental contradiction within this method is that the object of the research disappears as the research progresses towards the deeper layers of history. Objective research becomes subjective as the process of documentation becomes the object. The debate on demolishing or heritage listing and refurbishing Robin Hood Gardens raises questions of architectural and historical values and social ideals. To examine the role illustration can play in visualising layers of history and inhabitation in this contested space I am reworking the layering method of *falkutatás* in my illustration practice, and creating an illustrated cookbook of collected recipes from residents of Robin Hood Gardens.

Mark Lemanski – *What does preservation mean?*

Which part of Robin Hood Gardens would you want to preserve? It's idea, the fabric, the place it's become, or something entirely different?

Biographies

Alan Powers has a degree in History of Art. His subject area is chiefly twentieth century Britain, and he has published on aspects of art, architecture, design and urbanism, among them editing the book *Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions*, 2009. He has a long-standing involvement with the Twentieth Century Society and its activities in casework, publishing and events, and was Chairman of the Society 2007-12. He is founder editor of the journal *Twentieth Century Architecture* and one of the editors of the monograph series *Twentieth Century Architects*. He taught for many years at the University of Greenwich and now teaches at NYU London, the London School of Architecture and Courtauld Institute public programmes.

Catherine Croft has been Director of the Twentieth Century Society for over ten years, and is Editor of the C20 magazine. Catherine read Architecture at Cambridge University, and did an MA in Material Culture & Architectural History in the USA, where she held a fellowship at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware. She has lectured to post graduate building conservation students throughout the UK, and is an alumni of the Architectural Association course. Prior to C20 Society she worked for English Heritage as a buildings inspector in London and the Midlands. Author of a book on Concrete Architecture, Catherine writes on contemporary as well as historic buildings, lectures internationally and teaches a course on concrete for conservation professionals at West Dean College.

Sarah Wigglesworth is the founder and director of Sarah Wigglesworth Architects, a London-based practice interested in working with clients and users to create beautiful, meaningful, sustainable places for everyday activities. Sarah is also Professor of Architecture at The University of Sheffield where she heads the DWELL (Designing for Wellbeing in Environments for Later Life) research project that aims to design exemplary places for older people.

David Crowley runs the Critical Writing in Art & Design MA at the Royal College of Art, London. He has a specialist interest in the art and design histories of Eastern Europe under communist rule. His books include *Warsaw* (2003) and three edited volumes: *Socialism and Style. Material Culture in Post-war Eastern Europe* (2000); *Socialist Spaces. Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (2003); and *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (2010). He writes regularly for the art and design press. Crowley also curates exhibitions (including Cold War Modern at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2008–9; The Power of Fantasy. Modern and Contemporary Art from Poland at BOZAR, Brussels, 2011; and Sounding the Body Electric. Experiments in Art and Music in Eastern Europe at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2012 and Calvert 22, London, 2013).

Jessie Brennan is a London-based British artist whose practice explores the representation of places through drawing

and dialogue, informed by their changing contexts and a direct engagement with the people who occupy them. She graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2007 and has since produced and exhibited projects nationally and internationally, including *The Cut* (2011), *What is necessary here?* (2014), *A Fall of Ordinariness and Light* (2014) and most recently *Regeneration!* (2015).

Susanne Tutsch is a practicing architect with a Masters in Architectural History from UCL. Susanne is acting as visiting critic at several architecture schools and as tutor at the annual summer school 'Studio in the Woods'. She is a member of the Hackney Design Panel. Susanne is a director of Erect Architecture. Erect work with a wider definition of architectural practice. Their projects have a strong community focus, embedding stakeholder and community engagement into their work. Recent projects include Camden Active Spaces, a preventative health care pilot project by Camden and the NHS, with outcomes evaluated by UCL. Erect developed strong narratives for a series of playgrounds together with the children and community to draw in inherently less confident and active children through imagining and roleplay. Another key project is Timber Lodge and Tumbling Bay, a multiple award winning and widely publicised play landscape and community hub in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

Judit Ferencz is a PhD by Design student at the Bartlett, UCL. She is an illustrator and has worked for Granta Books and Vintage Classics, Random House. She has a background in art history in Hungary, where she is from. She also teaches illustration at City Lit.

Adrian Forty is Professor of Architectural History at The Bartlett, the Faculty of the Built Environment at UCL, where he is also the programme director of the MSc in Architectural History. In 2003, he was awarded the Sir Misha Black Award for Innovation in Design Education and in 2012 he was made an honorary fellow of RIBA. His work focuses on architecture's role in societies and cultural contexts. His research includes work on the design of consumer goods; on language and architecture; and on architecture, collective memory, and forgetting, and among his publications are *Objects of Desire* (Thames and Hudson, 1986), *Words and Buildings* (Thames and Hudson, 2004), and *Concrete and Culture* (Reaktion Books, 2012).

Jane Rendell is a writer, art critic and architectural historian/theorist/designer, whose work explores interdisciplinary intersections between architecture, art, feminism and psychoanalysis. She is Professor of Architecture and Art, and Vice Dean of Research at the Bartlett, UCL. Her authored books include *Site-Writing* (2010), *Art and Architecture* (2006), and *The Pursuit of Pleasure* (2002).

Murray Fraser is Professor of Architecture and Global Culture and Vice-Dean for Research at the Bartlett School of Architecture UCL. He has published extensively on design, architectural history & theory, urbanism, and cultural studies. He is a qualified architect and a former member of the RIBA Awards Group.



Image courtesy of Project Architects