

A NEW KIND OF BLEAK

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Journeys Through Urban Britain

OWEN HATHERLEY



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*... We wanted something new, and we
Would sacrifice most anything
(Well, decorum definitely)
To get our gawky, sky-jostling
Ruck with nature set in knifey
Portland stone. Of course, I know
Time hasn't widened out the way
We reckoned all those years ago.
You plan for that, allow for that.
I know the building might have housed
The odd careerist democrat
Or two, and yes, we missed
Our chance to make a truly ideal
Hive, a fair organic whole.
That too was calculable.
Facts played their usual role.
What niggles like a buzzing clock
Are certain Belgian sightseers,
How they so leisurely mock
Our bid to level with the stars,
How smiling artisans can stare
Me dead in the eye, ecstatically
Perplexed when I say future.
We wanted something new, you see.*

– Alex Niven

Contents

INTRODUCTION	
<i>Will There Still Be Building, in the Dark Times?</i>	xi
THE THAMES GATEWAY	
<i>One of the Dark Places of the Earth</i>	i
TEESSIDE	
<i>Infantilized Hercules</i>	37
PRESTON	
<i>Nothing Great but Man</i>	59
BARROW-IN-FURNESS	
<i>Diving for Pearls</i>	81
THE METROPOLITAN COUNTY OF THE WEST MIDLANDS	
<i>The Patchwork Explains, the Land Is Unchanged</i>	91
BRISTOL	
<i>The Tyranny of Structurelessness</i>	133
BRIGHTON AND HOVE	
<i>On Parade</i>	149
CROYDON	
<i>Zone 5 Strategy</i>	163
PLYMOUTH	
<i>Fables of the Reconstruction</i>	177

OXFORD	
<i>Quadrangle and Banlieue</i>	191
LEICESTER	
<i>Another Middle England</i>	209
LINCOLN	
<i>Between Two Cathedrals</i>	225
THE VALLEYS	
<i>I Am a Pioneer, They Call Me Primitive</i>	235
EDINBURGH	
<i>Capital (It Fails Us Now)</i>	249
ABERDEEN	
<i>Where the Money Went</i>	273
FROM GOVAN TO CUMBERNAULD	
<i>Was the Solution Worse than the Problem?</i>	285
BELFAST	
<i>We Are Not Going Away</i>	311
THE CITY OF LONDON	
<i>The Beginning is Nigh</i>	333
Acknowledgements	363
Notes	365
Index	367
Index of Places	377



Introduction

Will There Still Be Building, in the Dark Times?

Gateway to New Europe

It is always difficult to return to Britain. One of the most painful places to arrive is via Luton Airport; or, to give it its full title, ‘London Luton Airport’, demoting a town of over 100,000 people to a mere adjunct of the Great Wen. It’s also one of the main places for processing the thousands of poorly-paid, poorly-housed East and Central European *Gastarbeiter*, those who largely constructed the ‘New Britain’ promised by the now defunct New Labour movement. The destinations from London Luton are overwhelmingly either the ‘transition’ countries, where it’s not usually holidays that are the purpose – Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and above all Poland – or cheap getaways to the south of Spain or Portugal. One of the operators here, Wizzair, had until recently as its slogan, as you enter the airport, ‘Wizz off to New Europe!’ This Donald Rumsfeld-inspired catchphrase was recently replaced, which is a shame, as Luton services quite precisely the European countries which have been most engulfed by the financial crisis, those that fully embraced in all its lunacy the ‘Anglo-Saxon model’ of deregulated finance, property booms and deindustrialization, adding more recently the concomitant of ruthless, punitive austerity programmes. For these reasons Luton is, in its largely unspoken way, a very important place – a fulcrum of the real New Europe, where neoliberalism has created a new and bracingly unpleasant landscape, leaving far behind the attachment to making and

crafting that still occasionally rears its head in France, Germany or Scandinavia.

This is communicated especially sharply in Luton's architecture, as here you can see that the UK is the very newest part of New Europe, in its total lack of concern for the built environment, in its heedless accumulation of exurban kipple. For instance, if you leave Okęcie airport in Warsaw – Poland being admittedly the 'transition' economy least affected by the crash, due to 'old' methods such as a strong industrial base and public capital investment – you're leaving behind a reasonably clean, expensive, airy piece of design. Arrive in Luton, and you're in a carceral, cheap, chaotic place, one that has happened seemingly entirely by accident. At the same time, no other European country, not even the Russian Federation, makes as much fuss about itself at its entrance as Great Britain. First, there's the posters, designed to intimidate the guest worker and 'reassure' the *Daily Mail* reader: ASYLUM (don't even think about it). HUMAN TRAFFICKING (you probably are, or the friendly man next to you in the queue is). TERRORISM, too, is a constant visual presence. On little screens above the concourse, Sky News broadcasts a perpetual loop of horror – economic crisis, natural disaster, environmental catastrophe, helpfully subtitled in broken sentences so that you can read as you queue. The sign 'UK BORDER' is over the passport desk, again in another ostentatious gesture of reassurance/intimidation. There is, in proper dystopian sci-fi fashion, a biometric passport gate through which the lucky few can pass, though the nightmarish future is postponed by the fact that it is seldom working. Get through all that, past a sign informing you that Alistair Darling MP opened the building in 2003, and you're in a tin hangar where every available space has been crammed with retail. If you're on your way out of the UK, it's even more extreme; the waiting room is a cramped, low-ceilinged, badly-lit shopping mall, where the visual gestures – a curved, swoopy roof, Vegas light fittings – are just so much extra clutter.

Then, you're out, into the forecourt, where you can see some more architectural things; fragments of the earlier, 1970s Luton Airport, such as the concrete watchtower, some dour brick offices for the airlines, and most interestingly an orange hangar for

EasyJet, which almost seems to have been conceived as a visual object, with its huge steel supports visible on the façade. One of the blanker hangars on the runway bears the Harrods logo. There's no way to walk out of the airport, obviously, so you must take a shuttle bus (another £2, please) to the railway station in order to escape; on the way you pass under a heavy concrete bridge – this is here because the runway actually passes overhead, an impressive piece of heavy engineering. You also pass a factory – this is General Motors' Luton branch, a complex of some size, a reminder that things are made here, after all. In the near distance is the skyline of Luton itself, with its Arndale Centre and its multistorey car parks. Then, the station, which uses the same architectural language as the airport – metal panels that are filthy with accumulated muck, despite the fact that they are designed to be wipe-clean. The small station has to hold many more people than it was planned for, and gets around this by a bizarre circulation system of multiple escalators, each with a barrier to ensure that heavy baggage is not dragged through. Here, you can wait for the most expensive, lowest quality trains in Western Europe to take you somewhere.

The End of the Urban Renaissance

We're here as an appropriate entry into a country which, from 1997 to 2010, was supposedly going to create a new and better landscape, but produced instead the purgatory around Luton Airport, and the many places like it. In the near-decade-and-a-half of New Labour hegemony there were certain changes slated to be introduced, after the Thatcher-Major years of underinvestment in the cities in favour of out-of-town retail parks and exurbs, when entirely unplanned 'Enterprise Zones' were the vehicles for any new development. New Labour didn't quite break with Thatcherism, but rather attempted to realize a version of the European social democratic city, fundamentally via Thatcherite means. Labour politicians like John Prescott, Richard Leese or Ken Livingstone, urbanists and architects like Richard Rogers and Ricky Burdett, all seemed to want to create Barcelona or Berlin using the methods of Canary Wharf. Rather than

leaving everything to the market, there would be ‘public–private partnerships’ for directing the market into the places it had hitherto neglected – public services, inner cities – which it soon found were profitable enough in their way, especially when underwritten by the state. I wrote about the consequences in 2010 in a book called *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, in which it’s fair to say I was scornful towards the results. Even when writing the book, it was abundantly clear that New Labour and its peculiar form of ‘social Thatcherism’ was coming to an end, although it was not entirely clear what it was going to be replaced with. A new Keynesianism, as favoured by the likes of the current Shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls? A new One Nation Toryism, under a Conservative leader determined to lose the bad smell associated with the ‘nasty party’? Or something else?

What we got was, as we now know, something considerably worse: a Tory–Whig coalition committed to an extremist revision of Thatcherism with the New Labour fig leaf stripped off as no longer useful. Yet it won’t do to present this, as Labour apologists are fond of doing, as a phenomenon which owes nothing to the outgoing government. What with the likely production of a double-dip recession by cutting off the stimulus programmes brought in under Gordon Brown, not to mention the ex-PM’s startling and passionate attack on Rupert Murdoch and News International, some act as if the man was the greatest prime minister we never had. Harriet Harman is reincarnated as the scourge of benefit-cutters (does anyone remember her first move as Social Security secretary, slashing disabled and lone parent benefits in 1997? Thought not). Though the Labour Party in 2010–11 briefly showed signs of actual life and debate for the first time in a decade, any amnesia is dangerous. Andrew Lansley’s health care reforms, moving towards an authentic part-privatization of the NHS, build on the Foundation Hospitals, Private Finance Initiatives and ‘market discipline’ brought into the health service by Blairite fiat. The ‘free schools’ run by pushy middle-class parents are City Academies taken to their logical conclusion. The punitive cuts to disabled and unemployment benefits were anticipated by Work and Pensions secretary James Purnell, likewise in the face of rising unemployment. The Browne Report on education that

paved the way for the elimination of humanities funding and introduction of £9,000 per annum tuition fees may have been enforced and defended by Tory minister David Willetts, but it was commissioned by the Labour government. The slashing of Housing Benefit and the ending of lifelong council tenure on public housing estates, combined with ‘Right to Buy Plus’, aimed transparently at emptying potentially lucrative inner-city areas of their remaining poor, are possible only because of New Labour’s refusal to build new council housing, its demonizing of estates and their inhabitants, and its attempt to break up ‘single class’ estates in favour of a ‘mixed tenure’, in which a mainly private estate would be, in the parlance, ‘pepper-potted’ with a tiny percentage of ‘affordable’ flats for the deserving poor. The rhetoric of ‘austerity’, the ludicrous notion that a luxuriantly rich Western nation cannot afford its welfare state any more, was a staple of New Labour’s more macho ministers. Nevertheless there are real differences, and it’s in the governments’ respective attitude towards planning, the cities, and by association architecture, that many can be seen.

The Tory–Whig coalition declared, very early on, an end to the ‘Urban Renaissance’ that allegedly characterized the New Labour era, with the production of new inner-urban space and the apparent favouring of spectacular or expensive architecture. Michael Gove has made a series of specific attacks on the architect most associated with that movement, declaring: ‘We won’t have Richard Rogers designing your school.’ This he linked to the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme, one of the ambitious late New Labour stimulus projects, which he declared was just a machine for enriching architects, though as ever the real beneficiaries were the consultants brought in to manage the labyrinthine Private Finance Initiative contracts. BSF, as it is called in the trade, entailed a massive expansion of the two-tier state education system, with most of the money earmarked for the transformation of ‘bog-standard’ comprehensives into City Academies; its preference for wholesale destruction over refurbishment of serviceable Victorian board schools or 1960s steel-and-glass comprehensives was not driven by any particularly educational motives. The new schools, when they emerged,

were mostly bland, mock-modern structures which on occasion had major structural flaws; a few were allowed to be 'exceptional', such as the steroidal Evelyn Grace Academy in Brixton, designed by Zaha Hadid for ARK, the educational charity run by Hedge Fund manager Arpad 'Arki' Busson.¹ But the cancellation of BSF was unconditional – no serious school-building or refurbishment programme would replace it. And what of the coming Free Schools, what might they look like? A clue can be found in the fact that Gove's advisers on their design were former chairmen of Dixons and Tesco. Richard Rogers will be replaced with strip malls.

There are many similar stories. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, the state-funded body that assessed new developments on their architectural quality and planning coherence, was wound up by the coalition with all funding cut off – a rump was merged with the Design Council, its already limited powers further circumscribed; at the time of writing, it plans to become a private consultancy, for the local authorities that can spare extra cash for 'good design'. CABE was a quango of a deeply cliquy sort, with little ability to enforce its advisory role, but it was also regularly critical of developers, especially in the last years of New Labour, when the 'Kickstart' stimulus programme threw money at the worst kind of volume housebuilders. At the same time, the Regional Development Agencies were abolished. These were not, it must be said, particularly noble institutions. They were quangos set up to administer what would once have been the province of the elected Metropolitan District Councils (Merseyside, Tyneside, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Greater London, all abolished in 1986 as a threat to central government); state-funded bodies that threw money at redevelopment projects in depressed ex-industrial areas. They were an inadequate substitute, with no public accountability – but their abolition leaves a near-total vacuum, filled only by the dozens of competing, inimical and underfunded local authorities. The list goes on and on – Pathfinder, the highly dubious 'housing market renewal' scheme that demolished acres of decent, viable housing in northern cities in order to engineer a property bubble in areas without one, was discontinued, and a

good thing too; but the cities thus scarred have no major source of funding to replace or reconstruct what was needlessly destroyed under New Labour. The more general funding squeeze on local government, hitting poor and inner urban areas disproportionately, means that cities will be left to do what they did throughout the 1980s and 1990s – contract, decline, and slowly die.

Planning, and not just of the urban sort, has been a major Tory–Whig target. The planning reforms of the new government aimed to finally cancel the remains of the 1945 Labour government’s still-just-sometimes-extant attempt to create a vaguely humane city and country. In the process, the coalition have found themselves attacking some of their natural allies – conservationists in the shires, alarmed by the imminent presence of Barratt Homes on the green belt, this being among the few areas now where developers can build and make a safe profit; or the National Trust and its supporters, exercised by the putative sell-off of state-owned forests. The extent of their disdain for any attempt to think about, or design, or care for the human environment can be seen in the government’s declaration in 2011 that they were considering withdrawing funding from UNESCO. This multinational body has a tendency to side against developers, in its protection of heritage sites like Liverpool Pier Head or Greenwich Market. Anyone standing in the way of *laissez-faire* is being taken on, in a startling, deliberately shocking assault on what remains of a planning system or safeguards against perverse development. In a telling phrase, one adviser to the Prime Minister publicly claimed that in local government, ‘chaos is a good thing’.²

The reasons for this are straightforward enough. In order to at once conform with the increasingly psychotic free-market ideology and cut the deficit (even though it is not particularly large historically), all possible restrictions on development must be removed, in a desperate attempt to get one of the few still lucrative departments of the British economy – that obsessed-over property market – back to speculating, building and selling, irrespective of the fact that it was a housing bubble that triggered the current worldwide crisis in the first place. The same logic underpins their one real alternative model of development – the Enterprise Zone. These were a major feature of Thatcherism,

brought in across various former industrial areas – zones where taxes, planning regulations and such did not apply, where the ‘non-plan’ once favoured by lefty urbanists would be deployed in ultra-capitalist conditions. The results did little but lead to the relocation of some offices, malls and houses to ex-docks and steelworks; the counter-example which ‘worked’, London’s Docklands, succeeded largely because of two unusual factors – first, the City of London expanding to the point where it needed a second centre, and second, a large degree of public investment, including the construction of a light railway. Even then, the radically inequitable landscape created on the former London Docks can only be seen as a success in a very limited fashion. The main result of Enterprise Zones in the past was the likes of Luton Airport; there’s no reason to think it will be different this time.

The existence of a Tory–Whig coalition is apt, because ever since Thatcher the genuinely conservative, traditionalist, ‘One Nation’ breed of Tory has been conspicuous by its absence; she remade the Tories into Manchester Liberals, ruthless, modernizing free marketeers. That the old Whigs, especially their Orange Book neoliberal wing, should join with them finally reunites the two split fragments of the nineteenth-century ruling class. The entrance, however circumscribed and compromised, of the masses into British politics, via the Labour Party, no longer forms a real part of the political landscape, Labour having long since thrown in their lot with the new Manchester Whiggism. However, it is not a simple matter to run a country in so unromantic a fashion, especially a country so obstinately traditionalist as the UK. To use the useful phrase of Deleuze and Guattari, the Tory–Whig coalition has to always ‘reterritorialize’ in order to make up for the radically ‘deterritorializing’ effects of *laissez-faire*; its bonfire of old certainties, destruction of communities, and creation of new and hideous landscapes. So there are other ideas doing the rounds, aside from the total assault on the public sphere; the ‘Big Society’, or the ‘localism agenda’, both remnants of David Cameron’s brief, pre-crisis ‘One Nation’ phase. One entails the voluntary running of public services in theory, with Serco or Capita running public services in practice. The other is a directly reactionary appeal to the old ways of life that neoliberalism

destroys, via Housing Minister Grant Shapps's advocacy of 'vernacular' designs using local materials; an attack on the 'garden grabbing' that allegedly occurred during the urban-based boom of the 2000s, where densification policies ostensibly caused overcrowded, overpacked environments; and an apparent withdrawal of central government edicts from local government – something which might have more genuinely democratizing effects were it not combined with drastic central government cuts to local government funding. These two sops aside, the Tory–Whigs have no ideas. No ideas about the city, no tangible notion of the sort of country they want to build, no conception of the future, no positive proposals whatsoever. By comparison, the dullards of New Labour start to look like the visionaries they all so evidently thought they were.

Garden Festivals as Crystal Palaces

There is, I admit, one positive proposal on which the leaders of both of the main parties seem to agree. It is expressed in different ways, and with different degrees of sincerity. For Ed Miliband, it's a question of rewarding the 'producers' in industry rather than the 'predators' of finance capitalism; for George Osborne, 'we need to start making things again'. Yet there's no doubt that both the Conservative Party (from 1979 to 1997) and the Labour Party (from 1997 to 2010) presided over a massive decline in industry and 'production'; both of them favoured finance and services over industry and technology. Yet here is an apparent change of heart. What does it mean, this stated divide between producer and predator, industrialist and speculator, this seeming desire to turn the long-defunct workshop of the world back into a workshop of some sort? Is it plausible?

Answers might lie in a book published thirty years ago, which was once a fixture of British political debate – the historian Martin J. Wiener's 1981 polemic *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*. This book was on Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher's notorious 'reading list' to the Tory Cabinet of the early '80s, and ministers were each handed a copy. Most of that list consisted of the classics of neoliberalism – defences of raw,

naked capitalism from the likes of Friedrich von Hayek or Milton Friedman, the books which are often associated with an economic policy that decimated British industry. Wiener's book was different. Not an economic tract as such, it was more of a cultural history, and its manifest influences were largely from the left. A short analysis of English political and literary culture, the centrality it gave to literature evoked Raymond Williams; its insistence on the sheer scale of English industrial primacy showed a close reading of Eric Hobsbawm; and by ascribing industrial decline to England's lack of a full bourgeois revolution, it had much in common with Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson's famous 1960s 'thesis' on English backwardness. In fact, Wiener seldom cited right-wing sources at all. He invited us to imagine a Tory–Whig coalition that didn't feel the need to 'reterritorialize'.

Wiener claimed that British industrial capitalism reached its zenith in 1851, the year of the Crystal Palace, whose proto-modernist architecture was filled with displays exhibiting British industrial prowess. After that, it came under attack from both left and right – in fact, Wiener argues that the left and right positions were essentially indistinguishable. Whether ostensibly conservative, like the Gothic architect Augustus Welsby Pugin, or Marxist, like William Morris, opinion formers in the second half of the nineteenth century agreed that industry had deformed the United Kingdom, that its cities and its architecture were ghastly, that its factories were infernal, and that industrialism should be replaced with a return to older, preferably medieval certainties. Wiener claims the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings as one of this movement's successes – an unprecedented group of people who, in his account, honestly believed that their own era had no valuable architectural or aesthetic contribution to make.

This horrified reaction to industry, and most of all to the industrial city, affected middle-class taste (and Wiener has it that working-class taste invariably followed suit). The ideal was now the country cottage, and if it couldn't be in the country itself, then the rural could be simulated on the city's outskirts, as in the garden suburbs of Bedford Park or Hampstead, followed by the 'bypass Tudor' of the early twentieth century. The real England,

insisted commentators of left, right and centre, was in the countryside – despite the fact that since the middle of the nineteenth century, for the first time anywhere, a majority lived in cities. One of Wiener’s sharpest anecdotes concerns a book of poetry about ‘England’ distributed to soldiers during the First World War. Not one poem even mentioned the industrial cities where those who fought had overwhelmingly come from. By the 1920s, competing political leaders posed as country gents, whether the Tory Stanley Baldwin, marketed rather incredibly as a well-to-do farmer, or Labour’s Ramsay MacDonald, who presented himself as a simple man of the dales.

This sounds far from a Tory argument. Britain’s industrial and urban reality was ignored or lambasted in favour of an imaginary, depopulated countryside, and its industrial might and technological innovation suffered accordingly – what could the Conservative Party possibly find to its taste in this? That becomes clear in the third of Wiener’s points. British capitalism, he argues, had become fatally ashamed of capitalism itself. It was embarrassed by the muck, mess and noise of industry, shrank from the great northern cities where that was largely based, and cringed at being seen to be ‘money-grubbing’. Wiener, like many a left-winger, argued that this came from the English middle class’s love affair with its betters, the usually fulfilled desire of every factory owner to become a country gent, a rentier rather than producer. But he also suggested it came from a misplaced philanthropy, and a pussyfooting discomfort with making a profit from making stuff. In the form of the City of London’s finance capitalism, it had even found a way to make money out of money itself.

Now the book starts to sound like the Tory–Whig consensus we know today. British capitalism, it argues, needs to rediscover the free market, the profit motive and the ‘gospel of getting-on’ that it had once disdained. Wiener’s adversaries here are the same as Thatcherism’s punchbags – the BBC, for instance, an institution of paternalist arrogance which haughtily refused to give the public the money-generating entertainment it really wanted; or the Universities, devoted to the lefty talking shop of the ‘social sciences’ rather than robustly useful applied science. Enter current universities minister David Willetts, and his war against academia.

English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit divided the Tory Party between those who welcomed this new, swaggering capitalism – the heir to nineteenth-century Manchester Liberalism – and the true conservatives who were horrified by this scorn for the countryside, old England, conservation and preservation. The former faction won, but in its rhetoric the contemporary Tory Party still tries to balance these two impulses, rather ineptly – Grant Shapps praises garden cities and Philip Hammond raises the speed limit, Cameron advocates concreting over the green belt and Gove slates modernist architecture.

Yet if the book fell into obscurity, it's because Wiener's central thesis was so resoundingly disproved. He predicted that in bringing back 'market discipline', Thatcher would rejuvenate British industry and the 'northern' values it inculcated; instead, the industrial centres of Tyneside, Clydeside and Teesside, South Wales and South Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and the West Riding all faced cataclysm, on such a scale that most have still not recovered. Wiener might have praised cities and industry, but the former usually voted Labour, and the latter implied strong trade unions. Neither point was to endear them to the new, swaggering capitalism. The cities were even further emasculated, their organs of local government defeated and destroyed, their economic bases of coal, steel, shipbuilding and textiles downsized or simply wiped off the map. How did this happen? Perhaps because of that politer, more reliable way of making money – the City. Wiener scornfully quotes one Rolls-Royce executive in the 1970s who tells him that he is in the motor industry for pleasure, not for profit; if he just wanted to make money, he says, he'd be in the City. And from Spinningfields in Manchester to Canary Wharf in London, former industrial sites now house the trading floors of banks that had to be bailed out like the lame-duck industries of the '70s. And where industry really did transform rather than disappear, it took new, discreet forms – the exurban business park, the BAE Systems airfield, the container port, all safely nestled far from public view, enabling the fantasy of old England to continue unimpeded.

Wiener's heirs are those, sometimes to be found on the left, who try to separate out finance and industrial capitalism, as if they

could be prised apart. Britain is more obsessed than ever with an imaginary rural Arcadia which bears less and less resemblance to the places where we actually live, yet the profit motive has been strengthened in the process, not limited. It seems amazing at this distance to imagine anyone could have thought otherwise – a counterfactual Thatcherism which revived industrial, urban Britain. The Garden Festivals that Michael Heseltine bestowed upon Liverpool or Ebbw Vale, with their enormous exhibition hangars, were presumably the new Crystal Palaces. But what is especially bizarre about the current orthodoxy – from which none of the main parties are exempt – is that Wiener’s attack on all but ‘useful’ moneymaking activities is continued, without the concrete industrial products or technological advances that there was once to show for it. There is a counter-theory, which has it that neither speculators nor small businesses are the real ‘wealth creators’, but rather the masses who have nothing to sell but their labour. Their voice wasn’t heard in Wiener’s book, and it is scarcely heard in the current political debate.

Society against the Big Society

There is an awful impasse in contemporary Britain, a failure of imagination or intellect, producing a manic-depressive society locked into what Ivor Southwood calls ‘Non-Stop Inertia’, while the free-market ideology that seemed to be mortally wounded by the bank bailouts has managed, somehow, to thrive and become even more extreme. This is a book about architecture and town planning, or at least a book about architecture and town planning that uses these as a way to talk about politics (or vice versa). It might be thought that these areas of reflexion and practice, based as they are on positive proposals for space and place, might have some contribution to make. They may, perhaps, be able to offer some ways out.

One suggestion made by some on the libertarian, anarchist end of the left, recognizing the manner in which the Tory–Whig coalition has inadvertently used ideas not massively different from the anti-state-planning ideas of anarchist architect Colin Ward (although radically against their original intent), entails using the

Big Society against itself; taking literally the notions of ‘localism’, voluntarism and ‘community-driven’ development against quangos and government agencies. This is perhaps not as implausible as it might sound. To take one, highly-charged example, we could look at the change in management in a council estate in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The Byker Estate, designed by a team led by Ralph Erskine, begun in 1969 and abandoned, unfinished, in 1981, has long been both an architectural and social cause célèbre. Looked at coldly, it’s hard to see why. First, it’s a council estate, and a big one, the product of post-war comprehensive redevelopment, and the comprehensive demolition of terraced housing. No ‘mixed tenure’ here. Second, it’s full of winding paths and walkways, some of them in concrete; there are no ‘streets’, not much in the way of the privately-monitored ‘defensible space’ now considered indispensable in all housing estates. There’s a lot of communal in-between spaces – parkland, squares – which have no clear ownership. Architecturally, it’s hardly ‘in keeping’, with bright colours, abstract forms, and a modernist sense of sublime scale. It’s as poor as it is ‘iconic’ – it even had its very own famous crime case, the duct-living miscreant ‘Rat Boy’. It breaks every conventional rule for house-building and town planning in the UK over the last thirty years.

It’s not too far, in fact, from Sheffield’s gutted Park Hill, which was redeveloped under New Labour into a ‘creative class’ showcase, with its council tenants expelled and forgotten. But instead of Byker’s tenants being the object of class cleansing, they have just been given effective control over the estate through a ‘Community Land Trust’, and the debt the estate has accrued over the years has been written off. Housing Minister Grant Shapps has hailed this as ‘the Big Society in action’. So what’s the difference? Walking around it, the differences are a matter of upkeep, planting and care, rather than architecture. The bright, inorganic colours of the original scheme are still present and correct; the communal areas are lush, not scrubby; there’s no sign of any ill-considered or stingy later additions to the estate. It looks coherent, confident, totally modern. Maybe that’s a legacy of the extraordinary care taken in the planning and design of the estate itself, with residents involved from the start. Development

was famously incremental, with tenants' reactions to each phase influencing the next – but even so, by the 1980s it had attained in local hearsay as fearsome a reputation as any big estate. But somehow, those ideas haven't gone away. The estate is now run by a charitable body, entirely controlled (in theory) by its tenants, which surely means the foundational principle of residents' active participation has produced a real legacy.

There's little doubt that lack of democratic control and management was a reason (if not the sole reason) for the failures of some high-profile estates. But whether or not the new Community Land Trust will grant that control or not, the real irony is that this place is being hailed by the housing minister at the exact same moment that all its ideas are being destroyed, all over the country. This sort of giant city-centre estate is the very thing that the coalition's Housing Benefit proposals aim to eradicate. Its careful, slow, bespoke (and expensive) state planning is the antithesis of the Enterprise Zones and the Free Schools. Perhaps, the anarcho-Big Society contingent might argue, we should demand many Bykers, spaces owned by the Community in which we could develop anti-state *and* anti-capitalist forms of urbanism. It falters on an obvious point, though – that a place can be taken into real public ownership in this manner, but no *new* space can be created using these methods; all that can happen, at best, is a situation where some older spaces are radicalized. During an acute, national housing crisis, where there are millions on the council waiting list, it can only be a holding operation.

Architecture and/or Revolution

Architects have not been conspicuous, lately, in coming up with new planning ideas. That's not too surprising, as they were the hardest-hit of any profession during the Great Recession – unemployment of young architecture graduates was at one point running at 75 per cent. The solution many resorted to was moving abroad, often to 'emerging markets' in the Middle East and South East Asia, where British firms have made a killing; this has led to embarrassing moments, such as when the Libyan crisis caught all of the main British firms with their finger in Gaddafi's

city planning schemes. However, the architectural orthodoxy of New Labour has been very definitely challenged, at least on architecture's conscientious fringe. The buildings built in that era, often encouraged and abetted by the rulings of CABA, were *all about the cladding*. Stuck-on aluminium balconies, stapled-on slatted wood, brightly coloured render, clipped-on covering materials such as the ubiquitous industrial material Trespa, green glass tacked on at random, metal extrusions that look like they serve some sort of screening purpose but which are really just a form of ornament, wavy or tilted roofs, staggered 'barcode façades' which hide the basically regular proportions, wild and crazee angles with no apparent rationale, wonky pilotis holding up the whole thing ... Underneath there was usually either a concrete frame or a load-bearing wall of breeze blocks, while the dwellings themselves were tiny, single-aspect flats. This created, as if by accident, an entire new architectural style, which elsewhere I've tried to describe as 'Pseudomodernism', for the way it reverses the old function-over-form morality of modernist architecture while rejecting the direct traditionalism of 'vernacular', neo-Tudor, neo-Georgian or neo-Victorian styles. That era has ended, at least in architectural design, although its products are still limping to completion. The fashion, at least, is changing. There are material reasons for this. Go to Clarence Dock in Leeds, or the flats just off Broadway Market in London, to see 'luxury flats' less than a decade old which are already in a state of advanced disrepair because of their delinquent cladding.

There have been two architectural alternatives since then; both existed during the boom, but there was always a sense that they were just biding their time. The new style, appropriately, has been largely used for social housing, or the little of it that gets built. The charitable Peabody Trust, once major sponsors of metal-balconied Pseudomodernism, have gone in their most recent work in Pimlico, Central London, for a heavy stock-brick style that speaks of solidity, continuity and coherence, courtesy of respected architects Haworth Tompkins. Barking and Dagenham Council have taken a similar approach in their very small new council housing scheme, designed as low-rise brick terraces by architects Maccreanor Lavington, with input from one-time fans

of Big Brother House aesthetics, AHMM. It sounds a little pat, this move from cladding to masonry, like a simple reversal of the boom's architectural values; and yet this new brick severity is notable for its seriousness, robustness, and social programme, all of which were absent from Blair-era architecture. However, with even Housing Associations unlikely to build much over the next decade, this will remain a marginal movement, confined more probably to luxury schemes such as Accordia in Cambridge. A similar movement can be found at the more scrupulous end of 'signature' architecture, the stuff that makes it into the magazines. Rather than the instantly consumable, instantly impressive and instantly forgettable logos that were expected, architects such as David Chipperfield and Caruso St John have designed provincial art galleries of sobriety, complexity and intelligence, often with great local specificity (albeit usually to the horror of the local press). Something like the site-specific concrete pavilions of Chipperfield's Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield exemplifies this intensive, highly thought-out, cliché-avoiding approach.

Then there's the second, more obviously provocative new architectural movement, christened by its advocates 'Radical Postmodernism', to differentiate it from the commercial tat that 1980s 'pomo' is best known for. The architects involved in this are London-based firms like muf, Agents of Change (AOC) and most of all, Fashion Architecture Taste (FAT): note the jazzy names, most unlike the usual approach for architectural firms (proper name or corporate name or solicitor-style brace of surnames). All share an interest in the social, and especially in taking seriously the idea of design input from, and very close collaboration with, the future users or residents of their buildings, pointedly refusing to discard their ideas or suggestions for reasons of metropolitan 'good taste'. They show an interest in researching the patterns of life, collectivity, privacy and interaction in working-class and suburban areas without judgement or condemnation. Their accompanying embrace of spectacle and jokiness, with *trompe l'œil* effects, nostalgic motifs and an *épater les bourgeois* approach to decoration and ornament, might seem to put them closer to Blairite styles; in short, unlike Chipperfield or Haworth Tompkins they still produce the sort of architecture

that looks great on the cover of a regeneration brochure. That's deceptive, maybe, as there is a sophistication and intelligence in the new postmodernism which marks it out from the vacuous iconists and solutionists of the '90s and 2000s. Nonetheless, the most obvious architectural development of the Great Recession has been the 'pop-up', the temporary, often developer-sponsored use of a dormant development site, a way of papering over the cracks and pretending everything's ok, of bellowing 'Move along now, nothing to see here'. Architects can't work without clients, after all.

Alternatives in EUtopia

British architects and urbanists, at least the more 'off-message' ones, are keen to contrast the difficulties of working in the UK with the very different approach to planning in Old Europe, especially Northern Europe – the Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia – where these things are taken more seriously. Is it possible that we could find there a way of rebuilding cities that is not just aesthetically superior, but also more equitable? One scheme I visited in summer 2010 seemed at first to be absolutely everything that British urban redevelopment is not. I was invited there by one of its local critics, mostly because I had published some harsh criticism of the gentrified new modernism of British cities, but at first all I could see were the differences – the ways in which a different planning system and building industry were obviously far more capable of creating viable, attractive, enjoyable and architecturally convincing pieces of city than the British were. The similarities became more visible only later.

This was in Germany, a useful example, given that during the boom the Federal Republic was regarded as a retrograde Keynesian dinosaur, what with its large welfare state, industrial base and reluctance to reform and deregulate. Accordingly, German commentators have been justifiably smug as they watch their Anglo-Saxon antagonists fall into chaos and collapse. 'HafenCity Hamburg' is Germany's largest regeneration scheme, although mercifully they don't use that word. It comprises a huge swathe of former wharfs, but the differences with

Anglo-Saxon dockland schemes are as interesting as their similarities. Both basically serve the same constituency – an urban middle class. HafenCity is not particularly concerned with being hip or ‘vibrant’, as it houses a disproportionate percentage of Hamburg’s affluent pensioners. This isn’t as odd as it sounds, as it’s the only clean, safe, and perhaps more importantly, quiet space in the centre of Hamburg. In planning terms it’s certainly not a chaotic Thatcherite free-for-all, but something very careful. It is centred around a public landscaping project – here by Benedetta Tagliabue’s firm EMBT – which weaves together a series of small plots each given to a separate architectural firm for houses or flats, along strips of dockside. These form the ‘background’ to some more wilful stand-alone architecture around the edges.

EMBT’s landscaping is far and away the most original part of HafenCity. Especially choice are the lamp-posts, which swing around tracing peculiar metallic waves, perhaps so as not to have any bourgeois strung from them (Hamburg has more millionaires than any other German city, as well as a very active and disputatious anarchist left). The seating in particular, moulded, concrete and Gaudiesque, is very well-used, and any fears that the place might be desolate or depopulated because of its class homogeneity are patently groundless – even unfinished, HafenCity is a



massive tourist draw, with open-top buses passing over a steel dock bridge that was formerly closed to the public.

I've been told that buyers at the Glasgow Harbour development, a comparable scheme, complained about the view of the Govan Shipyards. HafenCity, however, is practically built around a working harbour, and glories in it – each expensive apartment has a view of the container cranes, refinery and passing ships. It's as if it wants to encourage you to see as spectacle something usually hidden away from view. Accordingly, the office blocks which are mixed in with the flats are sometimes occupied by the shipping companies – to see a name like China Shipping, usually emblazoned upon a container, emblazoned upon a building, is a jolt. The building itself, designed like much of HafenCity by mild modernists Bothe Richter Tehrani, is a typical part of the complex, a piece of sleek, unromantic modernism, modelled like all of these blocks with sharp overhangs, presumably as a gesture against the North German climate. Each block is self-contained, but all are of a similar height, rectitude and expense, achieving the rare thing of a city that emerged all at once while being both coherent and diverse, at least to the eye. The individual structures are detailed in a variety of styles, with vaguely Hanseatic/expressionist clinker, Miesian steel, bright render and so forth, in order to give the effect of variety within carefully controlled parameters. It's all very Teutonic.

The foreground buildings are less careful, and make clear how mistaken it would be to think this a purely social democratic piece of urbanism. Each row ends with a tower. One is 'Coffee Plaza', by American architect Richard Meier, another is a building for Unilever by Behnisch Architekten, evocative not so much of a robust Hanseatic modernism but more of Brazilian maestro Oscar Niemeyer, with flowing, feminine biomorphic curves. It consists of both offices and penthouses, and is advertised here as 'Marco Polo Tower – design for Millionaires'. By far the most expensive and controversial project in HafenCity is Herzog & de Meuron's Elbphilharmonie. It is a large swooping thing at the end of one of these rectilinear streets, completely ignoring their context of neatness and self-effacement. It is, respectively, a hotel, a car park, luxury penthouses and a concert hall, this

last a preposterous Caspar David Friedrich thing billowing and crashing atop a 1960s warehouse. It was not initially part of the HafenCity plan at all; it was the private project of two local ‘business leaders’ who personally commissioned Herzog & de Meuron to draw up a ‘landmark’ scheme for the site, claiming that they would pay for the execution, holding many fundraising dinners among Hamburg millionaires in order to do so. Needless to say it soon went over budget, and the bill was offloaded onto Hamburg city council. The cost has risen over fivefold, and is hence a matter of some controversy. When I looked at the construction site of the Elbphilharmonie, rather than high-rent high-spec apartments for millionaires, I could see ads for bedsits, aimed at the building workers who are erecting this enormously complex edifice. They are at least going cheap, although the rate ‘per person/night’ implies that they aren’t supposed to stay there very long. Many are in both German and Polish, so readable by the workers from New Europe who are actually building the place.

As a town planning project, it forms a chastening contrast with the sort of schemes you will find in this book. Hamburg is not much richer than Edinburgh, yet it’s hard to believe HafenCity was designed by the same species that redeveloped Leith Docks. The place is a thumping indictment of the Birmingham Canalside, Bristol Harbourside, Belfast Laganside, London Docklands, all of which were trudged through for the purposes of the book you hold in your hand. As enjoyable public space, as urbanism contiguous with the existing city, as architecture, their equivalent in Hamburg is immeasurably superior, and any British councillor, planner or architect visiting the North German city would be well within their rights to fall to their knees and weep. All this masks the fact that HafenCity is the exact same place as Bristol Harbourside et al. It is a place which caters for, as the slogan goes, the ‘1%’. It has been commissioned by and for the ruling class. In order to get planning permission for such a project in a Social Democrat city, there are sops: a small percentage of ‘affordable’ units, public access, a University expansion and a U-Bahn extension, but these are minor differences, some of which you could find in the UK anyway. It’s the precise same typology – mixed-use redevelopment of a former industrial area, with only the most

insecure, casual labour left for the former industrial classes. I dare say there's less buy-to-let speculating and more renting, and suspect it is all much more carefully managed, but the basic ideology is not different. New Labour tried to make neoliberalism look nicer, and failed miserably, largely because they tried to create a social democratic city using Thatcherite methods. The Germans are constructing an unambiguously capitalist city using social democratic, or at least Keynesian methods – public investment, tightly controlled long-term planning, very little speculation. In the last instance, here too, the public purse ends up paying for the follies of the super-rich. But it really *does* look nicer.

Agency (1): A Corporate Headquarters for Collectivists

The problem with expecting alternatives to emerge from the practice of architects or from the town planning of less casino-based economies is that they're still tied to the dominant orthodoxy, whether out of choice or otherwise. Returning, reluctantly as ever, to the UK, we can find three groups, three forces, which are able and willing to resist the extreme neoliberalism of the Tory–Whigs, and who could eventually become the pioneers, the clients, even, of a more equitable society. The problem with imagining the city we might want, of prospecting around for solutions, is always one of agency. You can propose it, fine. Who will build it, or at least, who will force the changes necessary for it to happen? I have three answers here, which are Trade Unions, Students, and the Young Unemployed. They have all, in the last two years, made their own interventions into urban space, all of a very different order.

In summer 2011, I visited the new London headquarters of Unison. Although they don't, funnily enough, tend to be considered part of the Big Society, trade unions are still, by an overwhelming margin, the largest civil society organizations in the UK. The unions are voluntary, democratic, mutual, bottom-up, and yet they're the very obverse of 'localism', philanthropy and the other current shibboleths. Membership might have declined since its late 1970s peak, and a series of amalgamations might have swallowed up many of the once-influential

unions, with even the fearsome Transport and General Workers Union absorbed into Unite – but membership still stands at seven million, which puts the much-vaunted likes of, say, London Citizens in the shade. And paradoxically, the frontal attacks on public-sector unions from the coalition have revealed their unexpected strength, whether in the half a million who marched in London on 26 March or the 750,000 or so strikers who walked out during just one of the several public-sector strikes.

The largest, along with Unite, of today's amalgamated super-unions, the public-sector union Unison have just begun occupying the first purpose-built trade union headquarters to have been erected in the UK for nearly thirty years, in King's Cross, London. While as a piece of architecture it's quite deliberately unspectacular, Squire and Partners' building shows a face of the trade union movement that is seldom seen. The stereotypes of donkey jackets, gavel-bashing and brawny masculinity are wholly absent – instead, this is quite consciously an exercise in branding and modernization. It suggests what the 1997–2010 era's Blairite buildings might have been like if Labour had remained a socialist party. It's a fascinating, occasionally rather inspiring place. But the first thing to note about the Unison building is what it is not.

Oddly, given their once pivotal and still key role in British political life, trade unions have not always been major sponsors of architecture. The most famous union building is in Central London, in the form of David Aberdeen's Congress House for the TUC, a very expensively detailed Corbusian palazzo, with a Jacob Epstein sculpture and craftsmanlike finishes. It is one of several in the Bloomsbury/King's Cross area, near to the termini serving the North and the Midlands, traditionally the unions' strongholds. Even now, the NUJ, Unite and others are nearby. Also in the area is the original headquarters of the National Union of Mineworkers, a stripped classical building now occupied by University College. The NUM moved out of here even before their fateful defeat in the Miners' Strike of 1984–5, to a purpose-built headquarters designed by Malcolm Lister – relocated to Sheffield, as a gesture of distrust to Union leadership's tendency to get cosy with the Great Wen. It was left unfinished at the end of the strike. Unison's tower is almost certainly the first

of its kind since then. The two have a passing stylistic similarity, both centring on severe columns as a slightly strained metaphor for mutual support. It's worth remembering that the Unison chief, Dave Prentis – not exactly known as a firebrand – has said of the current wave of public-sector strikes that it will be unlike the Miners' Strike, as 'this time we'll win'.

The air of siege and conspiracy that all this might imply is conspicuous by its absence; no union barons or smoke-filled rooms to be seen. Michael Poots, the project architect at Squire and Partners, calls it a 'corporate headquarters'; Unison's site manager John Cole speaks of a 'bold high-street frontage', and both talk about it as a form of branding, a statement of what trade unions are in the twenty-first century. Cole contrasts it with the office block Unison previously occupied just across the road, a large, slit-windowed concrete tower which he refers to as the 'East European grey concrete building'. The union had considered moving to the City of London (before deciding that 'culturally, it didn't quite fit'), but decided to stay near to other unions and to the termini for the North. But happenstance has meant that the new Unison building directly faces the old. Originally designed for the local government union NALGO, one of those that merged into Unison, Cole says of the old HQ now that 'it was basically a concrete tower block', although this is also a fair description of the most obvious element in the new Unison building. To the Euston Road, it is a concrete-clad, steel-framed tower, with a mild case of the barcode façades and a rhythm of different window heights; but this becomes more complex at the rear and the side, where that corporate symbol, a glass atrium, links it to the listed Arts and Crafts Elizabeth Garrett Anderson building, a former women's hospital, and at the back, a small cluster of housing. It's a complex more than a singular building, although this is hardly apparent from the laconic street frontage, where the most notable moment is the aforementioned branding: a large UNISON logo at the top and at the entrance, manifesting the purpose-built nature of the project, and announcing the union's public presence.

The main bulk of the complex is the office block in the tower, spilling into the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson building, and curiously it's here that the difference between this place and any

other corporate headquarters is most apparent. On one level, it's a question of rhetoric. You find the brightly coloured sloganeering that adorned some Blairite structures, but the content is very different. Instead of, say, AHMM's Westminster Academy and its Mandelsonian mantra of 'Enterprise, Global Citizenship, Communication', each room features the rather more meaty, contentious 'Solidarity, Participation, Democracy, Equality'. What would once have been called 'improving quotations' are also littered around the building, with 'everything from Mahatma Gandhi to Billy Bragg' etched into glass doors and internal windows. Most memorably, given that the UK has, as Tony Blair once proudly pointed out, the most repressive labour laws in the Western world, one wall comes courtesy of Michael Foot: 'Most liberties have been won by those who broke the law'. All this heated (albeit graphically soft-toned and lower-case) rhetoric has to have some sort of correspondence to how the building actually functions. Given that the organization exists at least in part to fight for better working conditions, it had to be 'an exemplary working environment'. And here Unison are clearest about the old NALGO building's limitations. Not only was it dark and lit by artificial light, John Cole also points out that it had 'no social spaces'. Now, the union 'wanted large floor plates' in order to be able to create these areas. In the concrete tower block, there's a very pleasant roof garden, a café, a crèche, a 'breakout room' and much else. In design terms, these aims are compromised a little by the rather cold, identikit corporate detailing. Cole comments that opulence was out of the question, as 'we have lots of low-paid members' (something that didn't deter the designers of Congress House in the 1940s) but there's no doubt that the spaces work. When walking around it I chance upon a small office get-together, with crisps and what is (euphemistically?) labelled 'juice'. One comments that in three days in the new building, she'd met six fellow Unison employees she'd never met before. 'It shows how a building can change things'.

Most of the workers I saw here were women, and the building seems – perhaps inadvertently – to reflect where trade unions are currently strongest, in poorly paid but traditionally 'white-collar' jobs, largely female, and highly computer-literate. In the

face of accusations that unions are lumbering pre-modern dinosaurs, Cole points out that Unison has the the largest intranet in Europe, and Michael Poots lists with equal pride the building's impeccable environmental credentials. Given the evident success of the internal arrangements and the lightness and airiness of the place, it's a shame that its design language stays at such a low voltage.

That's something which becomes especially clear with the transition to the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson building. This late-nineteenth-century hospital was closed in 2002, with its functions transferred to nearby University College Hospital. The complex required a complete restoration of its much smaller, cosier rooms, with the original tiles and fireplaces scrupulously pieced back together. Sometimes this leads to enjoyably surreal juxtapositions, as when a vaguely art nouveau fireplace sits unused in the corner of a video conference room. Irrespective of the TUC's brief foray into high modernism, the most famous visual image of trade unionism is deeply Arts and Crafts-influenced – the embroidered trade union banners that are still carried on marches, where the aesthetics of William Morris socialism, in a pre-branding era, still have a vivid emotional role. Framed with foliage, symmetrically organized and allegorical, sometimes you even find architectural modernism immortalized on them. One RMT banner I spotted on a protest a few months ago was centred on an image of Charles Holden's Arnos Grove station. This powerful language is at least partly present in the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson building. In its main room, which is being adapted as a museum, with interactive exhibits on feminism, the health service and trade unionism, there is remade Arts and Crafts furniture (that you can sit on, for once) and a small library stocked with the likes of Friedrich Engels, Mary Wollstonecraft and Sheila Rowbotham. If the rest of the building avoids traditional notions of what trade unionism looks like, here there's a reminder, and it's a quietly powerful one. Perhaps this is a project which needed rhetoric and imagery as much as clarity and spaciousness. While Squire and Partners clearly took the place very seriously, a more nonconformist firm might have reconciled the traditional and forward-looking impulses of the union in a more forthright, convincing, dialectical



way. Instead, the pretty but mute faceted roof of the atrium provides the main connection. Maybe the commission should have been given to the Radical Postmodernists at FAT.

The atrium also leads the pedestrian towards the housing that was demanded by planning – deceptively so, as there is no public access. It’s a decent, unspectacular, stock-brick scheme of houses and flats, ‘mixed’ as ever, and clearly demarcated between the private element facing one way and the ‘social’ side the other, with both quite aggressively gated from the street. You’re reminded that the context is the redevelopment of Somers Town and King’s Cross, a working-class, industrial area of dense council housing undergoing severe gentrification, from commercial architects HOK’s BioMed Centre behind the British Library, that was fiercely opposed by local campaigners who pointed out that the site was zoned as social housing, to the new St Pancras International or the King’s Place commercial development. It’s the sort of area where unions used to thrive, now being completely transformed. The Unison building shows trade unionism transforming in turn, and in that, it’s an optimistic, encouraging building, an enclave of sobriety and solidarity in amidst the regent. It stands its ground, quietly.

Agency (2): The Students Take the Squares

Sometimes, the self-referential, apolitical world of architecture intersects with politics in unexpected ways. In the same week as the student occupations spread, on the same day as the ‘Day X 2’ demonstration organized by student protesters against cuts and fee rises,³ there was a story in the local and architectural press that summed up much of what the students were fighting against.

This was the granting of planning permission to something called ‘The Quill’, a tower of student housing aimed by developers at students from King’s College. It’s a fine example of contemporary architectural idiocy, a lumpen glass extrusion full of clumsy symbolism – the flurry of steel spikes that gives it its name is ‘inspired by the literary heritage of Southwark’ – but it’s a reminder that students are far from the privileged, cloistered group that some present them as. It’s the obnoxiously detailed tip of an iceberg, of the pile-up of awful student housing that has resulted from the partial privatization of education. Developers have made large quantities of money out of some of the bleakest housing ever built in the UK, marketing it as student accommodation usually on sites which would otherwise be allotted to ‘luxury flats’ or other ‘stunning developments’. Student-oriented property developers like Unite (no relation) and the amusingly named Liberty Living are, amongst other things, revivalists of the prefabricated construction methods favoured by the more parsimonious councils in the 1960s, and their blocks, all with attendant ‘aspirational’ names – Sky Plaza in Leeds, Grand Central in Liverpool – recall the worst side of modernism, in their cheapness, blindness to place, and total lack of architectural imagination. Inside, they’re a matter of box rooms leavened by en-suite bathrooms, charging outrageous rents; the most apparently ‘luxurious’ of them, the skyscraping Nido Spitalfields, charges £1,250 a month for each of its self-described ‘cubes’.

They’re also a reminder that students were encouraged under New Labour to be an ideal combination of indentured serfs and aspirant yuppies; the actual conditions of students’ existence in the 2000s, from the poverty of their housing, to their catastrophic debt, to their part-time jobs in call centres, to their years of unpaid



intern labour, were bleak indeed; but all was hidden by an oxymoronic language of inclusivity and privilege; you might be living in a cupboard, but it's a cupboard with a plasma screen TV; you might seem to be underpaid, overworked and tithed, but you were constantly reminded how lucky you were to be able to enjoy the hedonistic student lifestyle. Suddenly, under the Tory–Whig coalition, one half of that bargain – the expansion of education that accompanied its part-privatization – has disappeared, and we're now witnessing the fallout. So it's worth keeping New Labour's student architecture – desperately private, paranoid, gated, restricted, securitized – in mind when you consider the dozens of occupations of universities and public buildings that were such an important part of the student protests. Implicitly or explicitly, *this* is the kind of space they are reacting against. A protest against the coalition, to be sure; but it's also a magnificent rejection of the fear, quietism and atomization that was the result of earlier policies. Their use of space is equally fearless.

The first major explosion around the programme of drastic education cuts – well before the trebling of fees was announced – was at the University of Middlesex in April 2010. The coalition's aggressively philistine and class-driven rhetoric was amply foreshadowed here, in the closing of the college's most

successful programme: its Continental Philosophy department, a programme encouraging critical thinking which was clearly considered surplus to requirements at an ex-Polytechnic orienting itself towards Business, or lucrative overseas campuses in Dubai and Mauritius, spreading itself to the ‘emerging economies’ like any architectural firm. The interesting thing about Middlesex University is how totally decentralized and suburban it is, a series of disconnected outposts in several outer North London boroughs, and it’s just possible the various actions suggest what can, and possibly can’t, be done to politicize these places, so far from the metropolitan idea of protest as something which happens in highly symbolic central locations (Parliament Square, Whitehall, Millbank). The first occupation took place at Trent Park, the campus where the Philosophy Department was based, in one of those places where the ‘green belt’ instituted around London in the 1930s can be seen to not be entirely fictional. The advertisements for Middlesex courses at nearby tube stations are a literal facialization of the neoliberal student as a series of demands, alternately hedonistic and utilitarian, and always grimly conformist. Headed by ‘I want to be more employable’, it continues thus: ‘I want to be the best. I want to do my own thing. I want to excel. I want to go to the gym. I want to study business law. I want to see West End shows. I want business sponsorship.’ And with particular bathos: ‘I want to see what’s possible.’

For over a week, Trent Park became a ‘Transversal Space’, which is to say a Free University, with speeches and actions taking place inside the usual University spaces. The thing with Middlesex, and what made it so unlike occupations at SOAS or LSE, is that the place is already the model of the neoliberal university – totally dispersed, totally atomized, with no particular Traditions of Glorious Rebellion. If, as Mark Fisher argued in his book *Capitalist Realism*, the 2006 student protests over employment laws in France were easily presented as conservative attempts to retain privileges, Middlesex, and the protests of winter 2010, are the exact opposite – rather, they are what happens when an already neoliberalized student body tries to politicize itself. If, as Middlesex Occupation banners insisted, this particular University *is* a factory, like the factory it has learnt one of the principal lessons

of the twentieth century – if you want to avoid conflict, decentralize, get out as far away from the (imagined) centres of power as possible, disappear from public view, and make the question of who actually holds power as opaque as possible.

The second part of the actions which I saw some of was a rally in Hendon, an area which is somewhat less exurban, and where you can actually *walk* to the campus, from Hendon Central tube. The University's administrative offices sit opposite some particularly horrible developer-led student housing; the guilty party here is 'Servite Homes', who are just one letter away from accuracy. At Hendon, something seemingly familiar – a rally – was used as a convenient cover, a means of convincing authority that this was a situation they understood and could deal with easily, until it mutated into one they didn't like one bit. In short, the event consisted of several speakers whose interventions were quickly followed by the instruction to 'take the squares', meaning the grass squares in front of the University, and set up a Tent Park, aka a 'Camp for Displaced Academics'. The purpose of this seemed pretty opaque until students started erecting the tents on the space – several small ones to sleep in, and one large marquee, which was then draped with political banners, ranging



from direct slogans, oblique pronouncements and at one point, some art-historical point-making, with banners adapting imagery from Paul McCarthy and others. The Middlesex protests ended in a partial victory, with the Philosophy Department and most of its students being taken on by (the equally suburban ex-Poly) Kingston University.

The tactics of surprise and spectacle used at Middlesex have a clear correspondence with those used by later Occupiers, albeit on a much larger scale. At the first major occupation, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, it was especially interesting to see the movement dealing with such a central location, right next to Russell Square, where it was much easier to reach a public of some sort than it was in Trent Park; the place has long had the feel of an activist enclave, and a large banner reading 'THIS HAS JUST BEGUN' flew for some time in front of the college. Somewhat larger, and for that and other reasons the focus of much of the publicity, was the Occupation of University College London, at the other end of Bloomsbury. As fans of Michel Foucault would appreciate, they picked the capacious Jeremy Bentham Room for their operational base ('Jeremy Says No!' read one poster, depicting the eighteenth-century thinker; adjacent was another poster reading 'Jeremy Also Says Panopticon'). The Slade, just opposite, soon followed them into occupation, as did countless other universities up and down the country, and both SOAS and UCL had a board listing those which had come out.

The spatial politics of the occupations themselves are obviously worth considering. From what I could see at UCL, the ten days of hundreds of people sleeping together in one very large room had brought a certain intensity to the proceedings, and had shown how much this was becoming not just a campaign to bring down a singularly grotesque millionaires' austerity government, but also to imagine a new kind of everyday life. I was invited to speak here about student housing and the awfulness thereof. Afterwards, one of the assembled students said something along the lines of 'Yes, we know that's awful, you don't need to tell us – but we're here creating something different, something positive, by ourselves. We're living our ideas.' It later transpired that the young man in question was a former Conservative who had

worked for a while in the office of David Miliband, before getting radicalized. Let's not forget that under New Labour, the front bench was largely occupied by Russell Group-educated student firebrands.

The student movement would have been of little interest if it were just confined to what is undeniably an elite university. What the UCL occupation were extremely adept at, however, was the use of both social media and the space itself to publicize their cause. Not only were they impressively media-savvy – in one corner of the room, a round table dotted with laptops, which bore the label 'RESPONSE', people were constantly sending out communiqués on Twitter and elsewhere – but they were also keen to use the space around to draw attention to their demands and those of the student movement in general. This was the rationale behind their involvement in UK Uncut pickets of Vodafone (who allegedly recently evaded £6 billion in tax) and of TopShop (whose boss Philip Green is both a prolific tax avoider and a coalition adviser, making a nonsense of the already outrageous slogan 'We're all in this together'). It was also the rationale behind one of their more inspired actions, a temporary occupation of Euston Station, where they also produced a parodic *Evening Substandard*, pre-empting the media's hostility to them.

The student movement was astute in trying to avoid the tedium and predictability that marred the previous decade of protest in the UK, from the polite and for all its numbers easily ignored Stop the War protests in 2003, to the various sparsely attended 'Carnivals against Capitalism', usually easily 'kettled' and beaten by the police. On marches the students adopted tactics to avoid police kettles, leading to a chase through the streets of London on 'Day X 2', and many refused to follow the prescribed route into pre-prepared holding pens. By now, we know the response to this – the carnage of 'Day X 4', where a police force clearly out for revenge and a spectacularly servile media preferred to cover the mild harassment of two royals over, say, the police's near-fatal attack on twenty-year-old student Alfie Meadows, or the dragging of Jody McIntyre, a student with cerebral palsy, out of his wheelchair and across the pavement. Yet throughout, this enormously unexpected and unpredictable movement showed it

was willing to use the streets as it liked, a fine riposte to the grim, circumscribed, privatized urbanism of the last thirty years.

From this moment came, most obviously, the Occupy protests across British cities in autumn–winter 2011. There’s another moment which grew from it, to some degree, though it is often disavowed. It arguably came from the protests against Education Maintenance Allowance, the grant which kept poor young people in post-16 education, who made the Day X marches a rather surprising affair for those expecting the usual, usually middle-class suspects. In Hackney in August 2011, a chant went up of ‘Whose streets? Our streets!’, a slogan long-used by the anti-capitalist left on their symbolic marches. The results were very different.

Agency (3), The City and the City

One of the most succinct and intelligent descriptions of ‘urban regeneration’ was a documentary film by Jonathan Meades called *On the Brandwagon*. It begins with riots in Liverpool in 1981, a city whose population had halved, whose docks had disappeared; then moves through the attempts to put a sticking plaster over the wound. First, ineptly, via the Garden Festivals bestowed to Liverpool or Ebbw Vale, alongside the first, ‘enterprise zone’ version of Regeneration – then more dramatically through New Labour’s abortive attempt to turn our chaotic, suburban-urban cities into places more akin to, say, Paris, that riot-free model of social peace. Meades looks at the middle-class return to the cities, adaptive re-use, luxury apartment blocks, Mitterandian Lottery-funded *grands projets* and loft conversions in the factories whose closure was the problem in the first place. The film ends in Salford Quays, its gleaming titanium a ram-raid’s distance from some of the poorest places in Western Europe. The likely result? ‘There will be no riots *within* the ring-road.’

We’ve long congratulated ourselves, in London, on the fact that we have no *banlieue*. We felt especially smug about it when zoned, segregated Paris rioted a few years ago. It’s not like it’s untrue – irrespective of the existence of a Thamesmead or a Chelmsley Wood, our poverty is not solely concentrated in peripheral housing estates, at least not yet. Oxford might try not

to think about Blackbird Leys, but London, Manchester/Salford, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, Nottingham – the cities that erupted in August 2011 – these places by and large have the rich next to the poor, £1,000,000 Georgian terraces next to estates with some of the deepest poverty in the EU. We're so pleased with this that we've even extended the principle to how we plan the trickle-down dribble of social housing built over the last two decades, those Housing Association schemes where the deserving poor are 'pepper-potted' with stockbrokers. We've learnt about 'spatial segregation', so we do things differently now. Someone commenting on James Meek's *London Review of Books* blog post⁴ on parallel Hackneys mentioned China Miéville's recent science fiction novel *The City and the City*, where two cities literally do occupy the same space, with all inhabitants acting as if they don't. He set it in Eastern Europe, but the inspiration is surely London.

All of us, all along, if we were honest for a microsecond, knew this was a ludicrous way to build a city, to live in a city. I, like most of the people who were waving brooms in the air post-riot and claiming to represent the 'real London', was not born in London, and I know only two or three people who were. In the earlier of the twelve years I've lived in the city I'd often idly wonder when the riots would come, when the situation of organic delis next to pound shops, of crumbling maisonettes next to furiously speculated-on Victoriana, of artists shipped into architect-designed Brutalist towers to make them safe for Regeneration, of endless boosterist self-congratulation, would finally collapse in on itself. Like most thoughts of this sort, it stayed in the back of the mind, and I'd almost forgotten about it when it finally happened.

If you look at the looted, torched places, many of which are in this book, you can see they have certain things in common. Take Bristol, a port where you could walk for miles and wonder where its working class had disappeared to, which seemed to have been given over completely to post-hippy tourism, 'subversive' graffiti, students and shopping. Well, those invisible, young, 'socially excluded' (how that mealy-mouthed phrase suddenly seems to acquire a certain truth) people arrived in the shiny new Cabot Circus mall and took what they wanted, what they couldn't afford, what they'd been told time and time again they

were worthless without. Look at Woolwich, where the former main employer, the Arsenal, is now a vast development of luxury flats, and where efforts to ameliorate poverty and unemployment centre on a giant Tesco, just opposite the Jobcentre. Look at Peckham, where ‘Bellenden Village’ pretends to be excited by the vibrant desperation of Rye Lane. Look at Liverpool, where council semis rub up against the mall-without-walls of Liverpool One, whose heavy-security streets were claimed by the RIBA to have ‘single-handedly transformed Liverpool’s fortunes’, as if a shopping mall could replace the docks. Look at Croydon, where you can walk along the spotless main street of the privately owned, privately patrolled Business Improvement District and then suddenly find yourself in the rotting mess around West Croydon station. Look at Manchester’s city centre, the most complete regeneration showpiece, practically walled off from those living outside the ring road. Look at Salford, where Urban Splash sell terraces gutted and cleared of their working-class population to MediaCity employees, with the slogan ‘Own your own Coronation Street home’. Look at Nottingham, where private student accommodation looming over council estates features a giant advert promising a ‘Plasma screen TV in every room’. Look at Brixton, where Zaha Hadid’s hedge-funded Academy has a disciplinary regime harsher than some prisons, and aims to create little entrepreneurs and budding CEOs out of the lamentably unambitious estate-dwellers. Look at Birmingham’s new Bullring, yards away from the scar of no-man’s land separating it from the dilapidated estates and empty light-industrial units of Digbeth and Deritend. This is urban Britain, and though the cuts have made it worse, the damage was done long before.

With his customary haplessness, Ed Miliband said during the riots that ‘there must be no no-go areas’. But these places are nothing of the sort: they’re parallel areas occupying exactly the same space, and any urban theory stuck in the problems of an earlier era, fulminating against the evils of mono-class estates and rigid zoning, is ill-equipped to even begin to describe what’s going on. That isn’t to say that all insights from history are useless. During the riots, an assortment of ex-punks, chroniclers of rebel rock, ‘Situationists’ and ‘leftists’ decided that these

riots were somehow different, somehow apolitical, compared to those that went before. The bizarrely romanticized ‘no poperie’ Gordon Riots. The Watts Riots of 1965, where local shops were burned and ransacked with as much intensity as they were in August 2011, only with more firearms. The UK riots of 1981, when corner shops were not spared. The 1992 LA riots, where innocent truck drivers were dragged from their vehicles and killed. Riots always start with an immediate grievance – a hugely corrupt police force shooting a man to death, this time – and become a free-for-all, where people exploit the absence of the law, in which the people who suffer are often innocent. Rioting is a politics of despair; but to claim that these riots are somehow different, somehow ‘neoliberal’, because of the allegedly novel phenomenon of mass looting, is asinine. It would have been wrong to cheer on rioters against corner shopkeepers trying to defend their already small livelihoods; but it is equally wrong to pretend that this had nothing to do with the demonization of the young and poor, nothing to do with our brutally unequal society and our pathetic trickle-down attempts at palliation. Then we line up with those who think that looting Foot Locker is worse than the looting of an entire economy.

Something snapped in August 2011, and it was a long time coming. If you listened to what those few rioters to have got near a journalist had to say – ‘The whole country is burning, man’; ‘We’re showing the rich people we can do what we want’; ‘They’re screwing the system so only white middle-class kids can get an education ... everyone’s heard about the police and members of parliament taking bribes, the members of parliament stealing thousands with their expenses. They set the example. It’s time to loot’ – what you heard was an excuse, sure, but also a truth. Over the last few years, the ruling class kept trying to commit suicide – financial crisis, expenses scandal, News International, the Met, financial crisis mark two – and most of us wouldn’t let them, we’d rather Keep Calm and Carry On. These kids, venal and stupid as some of their actions obviously are, don’t want to carry on. They want to see the whole bloody thing burn.

Back to Business

Not that this seems to have had much immediate effect. I live in Woolwich, where among the burnt-out (or in one case completely destroyed) buildings appeared a hoarding headed 'BACK TO BUSINESS', promising a mega-Tesco, a Travelodge, and imminent Royal Borough status as panaceas for the poverty and frustration that led to the riots. It may as well have been headed 'WE REFUSE TO LEARN ANYTHING'. It could be a cipher for the way the country has responded to the crisis at large; from city councillors to homeowners, there appears to be a widespread hope that if we can get the property bubble reinflated, 2007 will be here all over again and the whole bloody cycle will start up again. You can feel this especially acutely in London, where the property crash was so brief that in the city's richer areas, it's impossible to detect any change between London-in-Recession and London-in-Boom. That, at least, is the main thing that, say, Knightsbridge has in common with, say, Woolwich. So change is happening, if it is happening, very slowly in British cities. There is still a feeling of inertia and hopelessness that has not,



yet, been entirely shaken off. This book is about an interregnum, a time in which the new has not yet been born. The Tory–Whigs have not created a specifically new space; nothing has been built in the new Enterprise Zones, few Free Schools have been planned, no Localist housing schemes are on the drawing board. These may well emerge, but they are unlikely to even begin to rival the urban changes wreaked under New Labour. I attempt to search for the coalition’s space, to some degree, although there is much more evidence for the effects of their negligence of existing space, their deliberate strangling of the cities, and more than anything else evidence of the swift dereliction that has overtaken the spaces of the outgoing regime. However, this is a book much more concerned with looking for previous urban alternatives, partly as possible inspiration, partly as a reminder that things now considered impossible were once considered normal.

Like the earlier *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* it is based on ‘Urban Trawl’, a regular feature I wrote for the architectural magazine *Building Design*, a series of architectural travelogues through British cities during the Great Recession. In these essays those cities are seen as political spaces subject to the changes in the British economy from the post-war settlement to the Thatcher–Blair consensus, as spaces where the movements in architectural theory from modernism to post-modernism and back have had profound and complex effects, and as spaces where the self-image of rural Albion can be tested against the urban and suburban reality. This book is entirely a continuation of that project, though I hope I can be understood without prior acquaintance. The first Urban Trawl was to a large degree an unrequested and mostly unrequited love letter to the great cities of the North’ – Cardiff, Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Bradford, Halifax, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Glasgow – and the many criticisms I had were offset by a genuine awe at these often wonder-filled cities. The places discussed in the second Urban Trawl are not, often, quite of the same order. There’s a lot more of the South and the Midlands, a lot more in general of the ‘Middle England’ that all politics in the UK is based on courting. Britain’s First and Second Cities receive

return journeys, but the rest have mostly been virgin territory for me.

Because of this it may often seem a grim book, one that concentrates perhaps overmuch on the gory details of some extremely unlovely places, though it is my contention that it's often here where ways out may be found. As a counterbalance to Middle England, there is a lot more focus on Scotland, a seeming alternative space within the United Kingdom itself, which accordingly may not be in the Union for too much longer. Large cities do feature in this book, but they are not its principal focus. Edinburgh, Bristol, Birmingham, London, none are places that hold out a great deal of hope, in my account; but we could find glimpses of potential new worlds in Leicester, Cumbernauld, Lincoln or Coventry. This book is in roughly chronological order, taking as I took them journeys undertaken between October 2010 and February 2012. Given the indigestibility of these investigations into Britain's urban space, it may be best to approach the work as separate portions – discrete journeys to the North's second-rank towns, to the West Midlands, the South West, the extensions of London, the East Midlands, and then the 'Celtic Fringe' – rather than trying to swallow it whole. The earlier *Urban Trawls* were accompanied by photographs from a Bradfordian friend; his photographs are here replaced with my own less professional efforts, along with biro drawings by a fellow denizen of the West Riding, Brighouse's Fra Angelico of Brutalism, Laura Oldfield Ford. She also put herself through a few of the journeys.

While the first *Urban Trawls* were mostly undertaken with a man who often knew British cities better than I did, around half of this book is based on travels with my partner Agata Pyzik, a Polish writer whose prior expectations of proper European urbanity were a constant source of shame, as I faced her incredulity at the chaos we'd made of our cities, her shock that Empire and First World wealth had managed to create such squalor. I tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to convince her that urban Britain does have certain qualities of its own, and if I failed with her, I hope to have better luck with the reader.

We will begin, as befits a period of indeterminacy and interregnum, with a monument to the old regime, to its most

INTRODUCTION

sweeping project of recolonization, redevelopment and the production of new space. After that miserable, abandoned present, we will try and find some solace in both the past and the future.



Chapter One

The Thames Gateway: One of the Dark Places of the Earth

*You Can Do What You Like, but You Must Do What
You Like Here*

Though their innovations should not be discounted, many of New Labour's experiments with managed neoliberalism were anticipated by the caring, sharing Thatcherism of the John Major government. The return to some form of planning and urbanism was the distant consequence of Major's curbs on out-of-town shopping centres, brought in partly to assuage the shires, but extended under Labour into a more positive focus on the cities. The Private Finance Initiative and the Millennium Dome were both late Tory policies that Blair executed with great enthusiasm, to the point where both are now indelibly associated with his reign. Likewise, the most extensive experiment in urban planning undertaken by New Labour was the Thames Gateway, which was begun in the early 1990s during the Tories' twilight years. It's here that you can really detect the way that there was a subtle shift in the market dominance of the '90s and '00s, a shift which is now being repudiated. The 'Thames Gateway' was a gigantic dollop of land between London and the North Sea; an area which should really be described as the Industrial South. It begins with the disused wharves of the London Borough of Greenwich⁶ and the Isle of Dogs, extends up the River Lea to the industrial estates of Stratford, then along the Thames past Silvertown, Barking, Erith, Dartford, Gravesend, Tilbury, Sheerness, Basildon and Canvey Island, finally departing up the Medway to Chatham, Rochester

and Gillingham. It passes London's internal organs, the places that keep the capital going but which property development and conservation have long since expelled from the metropolis itself: container ports, factories both closed and thriving, petroleum refineries, sugar refineries, several power stations, marshes and nature reserves. It is the estuarine path described by Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the riverside journey taken by the Romans to the blasted, uncivilized, inhospitable edges of the known world. It can still feel just a little like that.

Since the 1980s London has not expanded east so much as westwards, past Heathrow and out towards Swindon and Oxford, bringing in its train lucrative property development and business parks – the Thames as a Silicon Valley, the motorcade from Notting Hill to Chipping Norton. Pure, unadulterated laissez-faire would have meant the further incursion of volume housebuilding, microchip factories and tech parks out across the Home Counties into Oxfordshire and Wiltshire; and that expansion is what the reforms to the planning laws are designed to create now. This westward movement meant the continued decline and dereliction of Conrad's easterly riverside stretch, and that is what the Thames Gateway 'plan' was intended to reverse. There are reasons for this, not insignificant among them the fact that these places are marginal constituencies, populated by the people who decide elections. Working-class and fucked-over enough to be inclined to vote Labour, patriotic, atomized and flag-waving enough to vote Tory, they make the area a political battleground, which is weird for somewhere so seemingly uncommitted. In order to rescue the estuary, laissez-faire was tampered with in an interesting way. Development would continue its expansion of London westwards only under fairly strict control, within the planning system's strictures; but developers were given complete free rein over the industrial and post-industrial wastes of the East End and South Essex, South East London and North Kent. There would be very little in the way of public infrastructural improvements, at least until the forever deferred completion of the ambitious Crossrail scheme, and there would be little planning or co-ordination, with competing Regional Development Agencies and local councils bidding for their piece of the pie. There would

be housebuilding on an enormous scale, without the state, local populations or local government able to stand in the way. It was, in short, an Enterprise Zone larger even than London itself, a New Metropolis that resembled the incremental, speculation-led and car-based development of Los Angeles more than it did any of the Bilbaos, Barcelonas or Berlins bandied about by planners and politicians.

The Thames Gateway has recently often been a locus for M25 flânerie or exurban poetics, but it is seldom written about as a coherent entity. This makes sense, because there are few places less cohesive. It is a slippery zone, its very name implying that it is merely the way into the real event, the Metropolis itself. The name seems to have been chosen by a sadist, determined to ensure that the development always sounds pinched, substandard and suburban; but the area covered by it is absolutely enormous. This chapter is far from definitive, and will try instead to detail a journey that you can take, if you want, over a couple of days, rather than visiting every single part of the vast exurb. We will start on the Thames's south side, or rather from the Medway, then go through North Kent, crossing the river via an imaginary bridge to Barking, where we will gradually make our way to the Metropolitan Enterprise Zone of Canary Wharf, and, eventually and reluctantly, end at the posthumous Blairite utopia of Olympic Stratford. In this route, you can find a place that is absolutely fascinating, with unforgettable landscapes, freakish buildings and marvellously pugnacious people, but it always defeats you in the end. The Industrial South can be contrasted, unfairly but unavoidably, with the Industrial North, in a way which does not credit the Wen and its outgrowths. There are few places in Britain where man has fouled his nest so comprehensively, with the sad concomitant that he is absolutely obsessed with that fouled nest. In fact, he thinks it's an investment.

Under the Lines in Chatham

So, imagine that a boat has dropped you, as it may once have done, in the Medway Towns, specifically Chatham. Chatham looks at first like a normal town that has been smashed up and

reassembled by a surrealistically inclined topographical demiurge. The extreme dips and peaks of the land throw up all manner of chaos, usually of a fairly unpleasant sort, such as the road system that holds the place in a tourniquet; for the pedestrian, the result is that thoroughfares that should be straight lines entail squeezing along weird half-pavements and crossing a baffling series of traffic islands, with entry points in the most counter-intuitive places possible. Across the Brutalist shopping centre and Ahrends Burton and Koralek's law courts, a concrete flyover sweeps as if at random. An art deco war memorial looks over the general absurdity from up on 'the lines', the stark cliffs that run all the way through the Medway, giving it a strangeness and melodrama that is exceptionally unusual for the south of England. Where on earth, you would be within your rights to ask, am I?

It's an impressively weird place, this quintessential down-at-heel naval town. It is often claimed to be the origin of the class-hate epithet 'chav' ('Chatham Average' is the suggested, and unlikely, etymology). If you're coming (as, I'll own up, I am) from the railway station, after you negotiate the ham-fisted road engineering you step down concrete stairs into a dense High Street of 99p shops and such, with a large Arndale-style block at the end of it; also at the end is a civic clock tower of such grandeur and munificence that you could be in the Industrial North rather than the Medway; similarly, too, with the wonky-roofed, wood-clad Urban Renaissance tower that creeps up behind it. Next to you on the other side is a bus station that has escaped from Tellytubbies, big, jolly and bulbous. Yet at the heart of Chatham is a development which raises some curious questions about the re-use of industrial sites. It's a pregnant subject in this recession, with the scattered remnants of manufacturing in serious trouble, for all the noises about a return to 'making things'. At first sight, Chatham Dockyard, disused since the mid-1980s, conforms to the standard post-industrial Urban Regen type, being turned over alternately to the creative industries (an art college), the heritage industry (several museums, ornamental ships) and the property speculation industry (newbuild flats that are 'in keeping', loft conversions). Yet there's something unusual here.

The place to compare it with is the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich,



the huge Thames-side engineering works unexpectedly hailed by Tristram Hunt MP as a post-industrial counter-model to the Barratt Homes boredom that was mainly created by the developers' scrum in the Thames Gateway. In Woolwich, the Wen and all its values pervades the factories entirely, with the majority of them turned into very expensive new flats, with a tame museum, some Gormleyish sculpture and some units serving as estate agents, organic grocery stores and a gastropub. It's London at its worst, a self-segregating upper-crust enclave, a series of Canary Wharf yuppiedromes that just happens to be cast in severe Vanburghian forms, as if accidentally. Chatham Dockyard isn't like that – its industrial past feels much closer, it still feels in some odd way *itself*. Partly that's because of the way that many of the factories have become exhibits of themselves – one enormous shed houses various big lumps of metal as permanent, open ornaments, though it's the thuggishly powerful steel frame that catches the eye. Industrial wreckage – cranes, presses, guns, scattered about at random – is more a feature of the space than sententious public art, which is right and good. The architecture is more complete, more vivid, than at Woolwich. But what makes it interesting, almost exciting even, is that there are things actually

being built here as well. Pleasure boats and yachts, obviously, but ships nonetheless. Thrown together with the art school and the museums, the result is rich with potential. This is only really possible with the relative distance from London, where the pressure of property is higher; but for once, the idea of ‘mixed use’ seems convincing – strange, incongruous things thrown together that shouldn’t work, but do.

The distance from London has saved Chatham Dockyard from becoming boring, but along the Medway you can still see acre upon acre of developer’s dross – typically cul-de-sacs, of flats as often as houses, clinging to the river’s edges like stock-brick barnacles. From Chatham Dockyard you can see something just slightly more ambitious. In the foreground is an Odeon, using the same industrial Big Shed method as the old factories, then for producing, now for consuming; behind them you can see two skyscrapers. Well, almost skyscrapers, of a sleekness and finish that you don’t generally expect in an area more marked by concrete-framed blocks with oast-house cowls on top. Both have curved, glazed façades, and are a fragment of the ‘aspirational’ side of the Thames Gateway’s property frenzy, the part that involves the perusal of *Wallpaper** magazine and viewings of *Grand Designs* as much as of *Location, Location, Location*. It’s unusual in North Kent, relatively exceptional for its high-end smoothness.

The Condition is Grave

Now I’ve rooted you somewhere and established the possibility that you may be doing this journey on a boat, I can stop pretending I’m doing the same. I’m not even doing it all at once – my reason for being here is connected with the quirks of the National Health Service, namely the fact that for seven years I have commuted from flats in Deptford, Greenwich and Woolwich to Darent Valley Hospital on the edges of Dartford – a building that I found it appropriate to write about in *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*. So when I’ve explored the surrounding area, it’s usually been after treatment for Crohn’s disease and its many side-effects and knock-on irritants; which also means that I’ve occasionally hit North Kent under the effects of codeine or morphine, something

which certainly assists in finding sites of interest. However, far too often I just make the same journey, first on one of the worst of the privatized train networks, Southeastern, then on North Kent's Fastrack Buses or on TfL London buses (both make the same journey, the latter for nearly half the price). On the occasion I went to Gravesend, I took the Bus B from Darent Valley, which took me through Ebbsfleet and Northfleet on a proper round-all-the-houses trip which cost me a princely six pounds. The two Fleets are a study in place all of their own.

Ebbsfleet will be known to Eurostar passengers as Ebbsfleet International. It was supposed to become a practical New Town under the Thames Gateway, but although a lot of houses got built, it didn't entirely pan out that way. The station itself, from which you can get to St Pancras, Paris, Lille and Brussels, is a Foster-like glass box that was pre-emptively strangled by road engineering, so that it was impossible for a real town to ever grow up around it; a series of spurs from the M25 surround and encase it, and the housing emerges on the edges of that. Ebbsfleet has no centre, though it has many, many units of neo-Victorian or Pseudomodern living that somehow slipped through the CAGE net. The nearest thing to a centre is Bluewater, more of which presently. Northfleet, though, is a town of some sort. Like the Medway, it goes along and under high chalk cliffs, atop which you find very surprising things – patterned, Festival of Britain-style tower blocks, tiny terraces of the sort usually built for dockers, millworkers or miners, and the earliest major building by one of *the* architects of twentieth-century Britain, Giles Gilbert Scott: in the small Edwardian Catholic church here you can see more than hints of the blocky, heavily masonry-clad, modernized Gothic that would bring him to Liverpool Cathedral and Battersea Power Station. That's a lot, for a town this small.

The town of Gravesend, like Chatham Dockyard, is a minor revelation, a memorable small town both distant from and a cousin to London, able to breathe some of its metropolitan air without completely swallowing its bullshit. There's not much to Gravesend, but what there is is fairly fascinating. Firstly, there's the most hated building in Gravesend – I have this on good authority – the Thamesgate Car Park. Arndale Brutalism, massive and

monumental, it adjoins a completely uninteresting shopping centre, but is actually a very smart and dramatic building; in rich red brick around sculpted, ribbed concrete, its overhanging volumes have a hint of the early work of Frank Lloyd Wright. From a distance, it's a ruthless cruiser of a building, fitting just perfectly with the container ships which dock nearby. In fact, you can imagine a Zaha Hadid giving it the nod of approval for its fearless, attention-seeking tectonic melodrama. I can understand the disdain, however, because from the train it gives the impression that you're about to enter a shabby, disjointed place much like Chatham. You're not – Gravesend is tight, cohesive and built very much around the river. In its 'historic quarter' (there's no escaping the nomenclature), a dense high street of weatherboarded maritime buildings throws itself right towards the Thames. At the end of it there's a pier with a restaurant on the end, a characterful pub, and a view of Tilbury Power Station on the other side of the Thames. When it gets dark here, this is a compellingly alien space, the bright lights inside the Power Station speaking of the heat and electricity generated therein. Next to the pub is the local headquarters of the Port of London Authority, housed in an undemonstrative box, a long way from the baroque palace it built for itself near the Tower of London a century ago.

On that same high street there's a Town Hall that is really worthy of the Industrial South, a sandstone Doric Temple which for all its architectural rectitude and austerity really ambushes you, tells you that this was once a place which thought very highly of itself indeed; a fragment of the Enlightenment cast down to North Kent. Better still, you can walk through it to the seedily seasideish Borough Market, and then through that to Saint Andrew's Court, a decent, strong, well-made 1962 council estate. Walk back into the town centre, and you find shopping malls much as you do everywhere else. They're a little strange, slightly crepuscular, at the point between concrete Brutalism and brick vernacular described by Douglas Murphy as 'Brutalomo'; an attempt to create the dense and enclosed spaces of a real street to replace, well, a real street. The mall's multiple layers are enjoyable, although it's all strangely underlit, as if to make it feel deliberately gloomy, even sinister. Out from there, there's a fine eighteenth-century

church, a statue of improbable one-time Gravesend resident Pocahontas, and a view of some developer excrement. There's a very active local Civic Society group in Gravesend, and they are justifiably proud of the fact that they recently blocked a tall tower of luxury flats, through a forthright campaign of sit-ins and civil disobedience, a little Kentish Occupy. It's a precious and rare victory against developers in the Gateway's free-for-all; but the guff you can see clinging to the riverbanks in Gravesend is not tall, not modern, and is immaculately in keeping; though it tears up the Thames Path, it dresses up its violence with pediments and neo-baroque details. It's a bit harder to campaign against something that sweet-talks an area like this.

The reason why Gravesend's urban grain felt so refreshing was because my point of comparison here is always Dartford, a desperately sad town. You can get a hint of that when you leave the train at the station. Look up at the Town Hall, a '60s complex of no distinction, and you can always see two protruding things – a Union Jack and a CCTV camera, like a slightly laboured Banksy mural brought to life: community, nationality, security. It's hard to tell which building-boom decade did more violence to Dartford. You can tick off the suspects. The '60s, with its roadbuilding and loveless offices? Maybe. The '80s, with its car-centred shopping malls, and more pointedly, the construction of the M25, which chopped the town in half? Quite possibly. The 2000s, with its faceless brick and aluminium blocks of flats cleaving to the edges of dual carriageways? Perhaps, but they're all missing the point, really – it's hard to find much of a heart in Dartford at all. There's a decent enough high street, ending at a pretty medieval church, but not much else. The poky Victorian terraces in the centre make clear why – this too is an industrial town, but one too close to London to be able to carve out an identity of its own. You now get little comic juxtapositions here, from the attempt to Make It Nice. The pediments of an '80s improvement scheme act as a gateway to a derelict co-op and a couple of greasy spoons. A big metal drum houses a few chains, and the railway gets you back into London either to work, or if you were born here, to live when you grow up. All that said, Dartford is of some importance for the very large shopping centre on its periphery.

Appeasing the Gods of Craft

I often find myself visiting Bluewater, mainly because it's the closest 'amenity' to the hospital. The first time I went there, I was a little underwhelmed – having spent much of my childhood and youth in malls (like 90 per cent or so of those born since the 1970s), it felt like a familiar but expanded version of something I already knew very well indeed. The only novelty seemed to be the extraordinary setting, a gigantic Firing Squad-friendly bowl carved out of a chalk pit. Over time I ended up exploring it in a bit more depth, and its complexities and contradictions became more apparent, without necessarily making it a more pleasant place.

I hadn't initially realized, given the hospital's hilltop encampment-like position, that I was so close to Bluewater at least twice a month. I was within walking distance, in fact, or rather I would be if there were any means of walking there. What infuriates anyone used to enjoying the city through walking its short-cuts, walkways, underpasses, parks and general non-routes is that the place is so obsessively channelled, to an extent that makes you realize how much modernist housing projects, with their obliteration of gates and enclosures, were driven by



a now-extreme libertarianism. As the crow flies, or in a post-apocalyptic, car-free scenario, I could walk in about five minutes from Outpatients to the back-end of Bluewater, counting in some tricky negotiation of the chalk cliffs. Pedestrians are necessarily bus-riders, as the fact that access is motorway-only means there is literally no way of just turning up and walking into Bluewater, something which I'm sure Americans are rather used to, but for us is still relatively shocking. Eric Kuhne, the American architect whose firm CivicArts designed Bluewater, opined in a fascinating 2008 interview that Bluewater is 'a city' rather than a retail destination.⁷ In terms of its size and population this is true, so we need to evaluate exactly what sort of a city this is – a city with one ceremonial entrance, which can only be entered in a vehicle, where nothing is produced but where many things are consumed. The only sort of regime that could set up such a controlled, channelled city is a dictatorship or an oligarchy. Neatly enough, Kuhne explicitly praises 'benevolent despotism' and critiques the very notion of democratic city planning, with admirable frankness. Yet it's also clear that Bluewater is one of the many possible termini of the nineteenth-century Arcades that drilled through the solidity of the baroque city, their iron and glass construction the 'unconscious' of architecture, an oneiric, ethereal harbinger of the future amidst the ostentatiously solid architecture of imperialism – the place where the 'dreaming collective' spends its time. As the bus winds through a series of roundabouts on its way from the hospital to the mall that is yards away, you see the elevations that are the (basically irrelevant) 'face' of the building: a series of spiked glass domes over a long, bulbous metal roof, which shimmers in the exurban autumn sunshine.

Inside, the first impression is of everything happening at once. The city of Bluewater soon reveals itself to be docile, unsurprisingly considering the draconian code of conduct, and there's only the slightest hint of menace – but the entrance is chaos. First you go past the standard-issue Blair-era retail architecture of a Marks and Spencer, and then you hit something odd – four glass prisms, seemingly at random, part of the glazed part of the building that ushers you in. This might just be ineptitude, but presumably the designers know what they're doing here, given the (as we shall

see) heavily didactic elements of the interior; just exactly *what* is unclear. They're 'toys', then, as Charles Jencks used to write about postmodernist architecture's little devices, they're purist solids, they're the building's 'logo' – but if so, it's a remarkably asymmetrical and unmemorable one. Then you come up to a series of tall pillars, and two overhead walkways crossing each other, a suspended ceiling imprinted with a repetitious leaf motif, with the glare of the glazed entrance intensifying the effect – the shopping mall sublime, exacerbated by the thousands of people browsing, watching, buying, eating, or expelling their waste (for this is a city where those are the only permitted acts), and it's thrilling in its way, although the pale stone-like substance with which almost everything is clad softens the effect, stops it from ever becoming jarring and strange. Walking around inside, you find a large quantity of public art, and a surprisingly large amount of seating. Is this, then, a version of the 'Urban Renaissance', with its mixed use and its encouragement of sociality? Kuhne talks of 'special meeting places' that 'dignify the heroic routine of everyday life that drives you to produce a better world for yourself and your kids'. It could be Richard Rogers, this stuff, except that unlike the Plazas of the Urban Task Forces, people are actually using it, and in droves – apart from one closed noodle bar, you have to look damn hard here to find even the slightest hint that we're in the middle of the longest recession in British economic history. Unnervingly, it supports the idea of the financial crisis as a kind of Phoney War, which will intensify only later, but will be truly horrendous when it does.

For something which is supposedly The Authentic Expression of Our Real Uncomplicated Desires (as per countless suburbia-loving libertarians since the 1950s, most of whom seem to live in the nicer bits of inner cities), Bluewater is extremely didactic in its design. It's trying to make various points to its clientele which very few seem to have registered, whether critics or shoppers. So there are panels with little torn-out-of-context fragments from Vita Sackville-West, Laurie Lee and Robert Bridges about the glories of the countryside, its products and pleasures – well, there *is* agriculture nearby, of a heavily mechanized sort, although the M25 is the most obvious land usage. These quotes are there to

establish continuity, to convince you that the city of Bluewater is a faintly rustic experience, without relinquishing one iota the imperatives of steel and glass – no urban-regen wood panelling here, no Scando. One of the raised arcades here is illuminated by the partly glazed ceilings, evoking the pointy tops of Kentish malt kilns, showing a series of inset relief sculptures. These immortalize all the jobs that once existed here, an accounting of the professions of the workshop of the world. Fishermen, Goldsmiths, Tanners, whatever, the list of all those people who used to make stuff is practically endless, while beneath them are those taking time off from intellectual labour in services financial or administrative. It's a quasi-religious thing, this – an attempt at appeasing the gods of industry as they are replaced by the newer gods of consumption. What makes Bluewater's didacticism interesting is that through its poems, its fibreglass leaves and its statues of ironmongers, it comes out and *proclaims* its transcendence of nature and labour, precisely by memorializing it. When just-in-time production and distribution seizes up and we can actually walk to it, we can look at Bluewater's sentimental memorials and try and remember exactly what it was we used to do.

If Destroyed Still True

There is another peripheral exurb of Dartford that is worth visiting, partly as a way of getting Bluewater out of your system. New Ash Green was built by Span Developments Ltd, a company who were the other side of post-war mass housing to that of council estates and state-sponsored New Towns. Founded by the architect Geoffrey Townsend (who had to resign from the architectural profession because of his new job) and mostly designed by the talented Eric Lyons (later a president of the RIBA), an occasional architect to Southampton and Hackney councils but mostly a private practitioner, Span was both a profit-making business and an attempt to design spaces which were, at least implicitly, social democratic. They wrote of their approach, 'community as the goal; shared landscape as the means; modern, controlled design as the expression'. So they were impeccably 'Butskellite',

as the post-war consensus-describing phrase had it, only with the emphasis on Mr But rather than Mr Skell.

Span's most famous work is in very desirable places indeed – Blackheath, Richmond, Hove, Cambridge. I remember once hearing a moderately successful youngish architect proclaim that 'Span is interesting because it works', implying that this was a contrast with things that didn't work, designed most likely by local councils. It is however very hard to see how what Span were doing – car-free, pedestrianized public spaces, low-rise houses, plenty of landscaping, a Scandinavian softening of Modernism – was any different in design terms from, say, what Sheffield City Council did at Gleadless Valley which 'doesn't work'. Span works for one main reason: it was designed, and designed very well, for (often upper-)middle-class clients, so the spaces are looked after, the designs are scrupulously cohesive, and the inhabitants have invariably *chosen* to live there. It's not mysterious, and it's nothing to do with design. What cannot be denied is that Span produced very lovely places. New Ash Green is a harder sell, though, much more so than their enclaves in affluent districts of the metropolis. This place is not so much a New Town as a New Village which Span had designed in North Kent – so ambitious an undertaking that it basically bankrupted the company. The last few pieces of the scheme were entrusted to the somewhat less socially idealistic developers Bovis, then chaired by Keith Joseph himself, who as a government minister under Heath had tried to stop the place being built in the first place. Bovis still has its head office there, which might explain some of the place's continued affluence.

As New Ash Green is not a town or a suburb I suppose it must be rural, although I say this with the proviso that I don't understand or know anything whatsoever about the countryside, generally considering it an ideological phantom wielded as a weapon against towns and cities, inducing them to surrender any true civic life to dreams of homes-as-castles-and-investments, as opposed to a real place, which it must be, for some. You can only reach New Ash Green in a car, or by a tortuous public-transport route – the nearest largish town, Dartford, is reached via a bus which seems to be either hourly or two-hourly, depending on how bad a mood the bus driver is in. New Ash Green stops abruptly at one point,



where rolling fields start. Yet although it's essentially one of the Milton Keynes grids with all the surrounding infrastructure taken away, it's far more urban in design terms than most of what has been built for the last thirty years, even if the urb in question is in the outer reaches of the Copenhagen Metro system. The houses, for all their wood and brick, are still deeply modernist, almost futuristic at times, an impression reinforced by the signage – pseudo-rustic names spelled out in science-fiction letters. Even the streetlamps have something decidedly Dr Who about them, furnishings that could beam you somewhere else entirely. The landscape – nature under strict control – is the truly impressive thing here, something which even the drabber Bovis parts of the estate manage to retain: a sense that everything is public, everything is permeable, except of course for the houses themselves. Span seem to have assumed that a largish, well-designed house with big windows and a garden was all anyone needed for private space, with CCTV and driveways strikingly absent. Lyons and Span had evidently not read about Oskar Newman's theories of 'Defensible Space', nor had they spotted their incorporation into the Design Guide used by nearby Essex County Council. New Ash Green breaks every one of those nasty little rules, by placing

what now seems like enormous trust in the place's inhabitants. If, as Alice Coleman and her ilk have suggested, certain urban forms invite crime, then the in-between spaces here should be a constant fest of knifings and rapes. It's hard to imagine they do so any more than in Dartford's more obsessively defensible closes and cul-de-sacs.

There are nooks of mild criminality in the form of the graffiti that is scribbled on the walkways, much of which is so cute and indie that it seems like the local youth are all living in a Belle and Sebastian song. 'If destroyed still true, please keep our memorie's here.' It is not suffocatingly nice, though, and New Ash Green lacks the obsessive upkeep, the Keep Calm and Carry On posters and the general austerity nostalgia that you can find in the Span parts of Blackheath. Nonetheless, by the standards of 98 per cent of Britain this is hard-line stuff – the hedges impeccable, the original features mostly in place, the spaces extremely trim. You could have a wonderful life here and you could also go completely bonkers in a week. Span probably knew from early on that this one would be a hard sell. The RIBA's recent *Eric Lyons and Span* book about their ex-president reproduces some of the flagrantly sexist ads used to convince people to move to the back of beyond (or the back of beyond less than an hour's drive from London). Architect's Wives, 'vital statistics (no, not those ones!)', some fairly blatant suggestions of possible wife swapping and the general sexual intrigue that goes with being terribly modern.

The place may well soon become both modern and terrible, as architectural hacks Broadway Malyan are slated to redesign it. To get an architect of similar talent and prominence to Lyons, they should really be asking Richard Rogers – his recent speculative housing in Milton Keynes is a precise modern equivalent – but I don't suppose he comes as cheap. The shopping centre is slightly knackered, but even when compared with many more inner-city estates, it's thoroughly self-sufficient with its banks, health food café, branch of Oxfam, Co-op, newsagent, various other bits and bobs. I've seen places in Zone 2 with fewer amenities. Up on the roof there is some slight sign of ruffness in the graffiti, though having 'HENCH' as your tag is a bit sad. Like writing 'I'M A BIG MAN, ME!' everywhere. It protests too much. There appear to

be only two places where New Ash Green seems anything other than idyllic: the back-end of the shopping centre, a car-parking area that for some reason has gone derelict before everywhere else; and the village pub, not exactly welcoming, full of regulars who look at us like we're from Mars – which is rich, as they live on it. The door of the pub advertises the Sunday Carvery, but rather than showing a farmhouse, the advert shows the outline of a thoroughly modern dwelling.

This Building Kills (or Abets) Fascists

At this point on our progress towards the Wen we leave Kent altogether, finding ourselves in London, Zone 4 to be precise. This is Outer London, not one of the areas that was part of the original Greater London Council (unlike Woolwich, just over the river), but it is geographically London, and votes for the Greater London Authority. From here the route is different – more on foot, and more by London's own, far superior public transport – the Docklands Light Railway, not Fastrack Buses. It is, it would seem, an even darker place than North Kent. The northern side of the Thames Gateway, once one of the few Labour strongholds in southern England, had a tendency during the boom to vote for fascists, and elect them as councillors. Thurrock, Tilbury, but especially Barking and Dagenham, appeared to be defecting en masse to the British National Party. Their Barking base was unexpectedly destroyed in the elections of 2010, and far-right politics have returned to the Plan A of cracking heads, in the form of the Luton-derived English Defence League. A week before the General Election I had a wander round Barking, and though thankfully the election proved the town had far more decent people in it than broadsheet commentators may have assumed, many of the points made about its built environment still stand, I think.

Barking was thought likely in spring 2010 to become the first place in British history to elect a fascist MP. East End sentimentalists don't like to remember that Mile End was once one of the three places in Britain to have elected Communist MPs, which would imply that local political identity once extended beyond

pearly kings and costermongers, although there's no doubt that the consignment of Phil Piratin MP to the memory hole has worked effectively. Although electing fascists is considered normal in much of oh-so-civic continental Europe, especially after the financial collapse, in the UK it is often still, rightly, considered alarming that such a thing could potentially occur. I won't pretend the following is much more than a light skimming of the (architectural) surface, but hopefully a few insights can be gained from looking at Barking. We walked there from Canning Town, through East and West Ham, a workaday, multiracial London interrupted by flyovers and creeks that make the demarcation with Barking itself particularly clear.

The area we saw was Barking Central (in the regenerator's terminology). This is as opposed to Becontree, the huge inter-war 'homes for heroes' estate which by many accounts was where most of the BNP support is concentrated. I grew up somewhere similar, cottagey council houses overlooking a giant Ford works, so I suppose I already know the territory. The centre of Barking was not untouched by the boom – in fact, it was subject to a very ambitious regeneration scheme, which local MP and spectacularly philistine 'culture minister' Margaret Hodge has described as 'my kind of architecture'. This is hardly a recommendation, but the comprehensiveness of the scheme is at least impressive: the redevelopment encompasses housing, leisure and public space, on a very large scale. Already as soon as you pass under the flyover, the difference between the terraced density of East Ham and Barking's sprawling suburbia is noticeable, with a straggling collection of dodgy pomo, Victorian factories, 1930s semis, tower blocks and wasteland announcing it. This then fades into a quite pleasant town centre, marked by medieval remains, pedestrianized shops and town-centre office blocks, all on roughly the same scale as, say, Dartford; though significantly more multi-racial, and with much more character than the latter. BNP-voting areas do not, on the whole, have very high rates of immigration – Barnsley and Thurrock are not Burngreave or Poplar – but Barking is a partial exception. Customarily, this is presented as being at bottom a question of housing. In 2010, no new council housing had been built for decades, though a large 1960s estate

had been demolished. Right-to-buy had warped the perception of what exists, so that considerably more agency was attributed to council housing allocations than actually existed. However, to suggest that, well, *racism* has nothing to do with it would be foolish. The fascist sympathizers in places like the Isle of Dogs didn't disappear in the 1990s – they went somewhere.

The edges of the town centre are where the tensions lie. One side features a large, derelict shopping parade, which has flats at the back, curving around a car park and some lumps that might or might not have been public art of some description, or mere traffic-controlling blobs. There's no disputing that leaving a load of housing derelict in the middle of a housing crisis is rather grotesque, especially in a place this charged. It's hard to decide which side is the more depressing, the empty flats – which are very likely of decent Parker-Morris proportions – or the shops, bookies and recruitment agencies that were no doubt even more depressing when they were open. The eye is drawn, though, to two pieces of very jolly architecture. First, the Town Hall, proof that there are simply no uninteresting town halls in London, a Dudok-Georgian mash-up with a wonderfully unscholarly approach to historical styles. The bell tower is full of suspicious-looking telecommunications equipment, and Bobbies On The Beat walk back and forth in front of it at a more regular rate than I'm used to seeing. Then there's Alford Hall Monaghan Morris's Barking Central development. AHMM are a paradigm of Blairite architecture at its most thoroughly developed, a glossy, brightly-coloured neomodernism that feels like CGI even when you touch it, the Weimar Republic colourfulness of Bruno Taut relocated to DOSAC from *The Thick of It*. Their tendency to the rictus grin conceals architectural talent and presence, but if there's a better exemplar of New Labour architecture than their bright, jolly Pseudomodernism then I don't know what it is. Their buildings here, very dense low-rise blocks and towers, hinge on the contrast between what you see – the fun façades – and what you don't, the grimness of the small, single-aspect flats.

A percentage of Barking Central is 'affordable housing', that all-purpose get-out-clause, and it bears constant repeating that affordable housing is not council housing, but is usually

shared-ownership or slightly-cheaper-to-buy, and so makes virtually no difference to the problems that were purportedly stirring up the BNP vote. Let's imagine for a moment, irrespective of the crappy space standards, what a gesture it would have been if a development this large, this shiny and optimistic, were let to council tenants – how many political arguments would then be won at a stroke. As it is the place is not altogether hideous, for all its fiddling-while-Rome-burns nature, and part of that is due to extraneous things, extras on the architecture which are surprisingly clever, and suggest how much more could have been done here. The colonnades (courtesy of landscape architects muf) are great, the size of the site letting the architects do something they couldn't have squeezed into a tight plot of inner-city CABEism; it's an actually quite pleasant and successful public space. The main occupants so far are pigeons, but that need not remain true.

Across from this is – honesty here, at least, in the choice of name – 'The Folly', designed by muf. It's rather asking to be judged as a description for the entire project, stigmatized as an act of expensive futility, and yet the sheer menance of it marks this out as something perhaps more interesting, one of the few built instantiations of the recent ruin-mania of any consequence.



It's a brick edifice that presents itself as an instant pagan ruin, from the headless creatures lined up and inset into it, to the gates that lead to nowhere – there is after all a ruined abbey nearby. The suggestion that it might be some comment or satire on the surrounding scheme, or on AHMM's refusal to imagine the possibility of ageing or weathering in their buildings, seems a bit much, although placing a sheep atop the whole thing has at least some tongue-poking symbolism. However, the massive return to the Labour fold here in the 2010 election has evidently provoked the party's gratitude; not far from here is now a small estate of stock-brick houses, masterplanned by sober brick austerity types Maccreeanor Lavington, with a terrace by AHMM themselves – moving sharply away from the bright shiny cladding of Barking Central to a robust interpretation of an early Victorian dockside terrace. For once, provided you forget that this is an only partial replacement of the houses they demolished, it seems the local Labour Party realized who they were supposed to represent. It's not complicated, and neither is the architecture.

The usual way into or out of here is another indication that a quite exciting town could be made here, if the will existed. Barking Station is a rare fine British Rail building with an angular roof in concrete so richly, darkly shuttered that it's hard to remind yourself it isn't wood; a bespoke station which suggests a local centre far from Zone 1 which nonetheless had a sharp, defined identity for itself, which wasn't reducible to being just another notch in the commuter belt. Opposite this is something that speaks much more of what Barking is today – a shopping mall, a glass and fibreglass atrium that resembles the iron-and-glass canopies of Leeds City Markets relocated to Thorpe Park, picked out in pink, with a false top-floor and an interesting selection of shops. Here you can find Freedom Mobility Barking (Grabbers, Folding Commodes, Scooter Bags and Capes, Overbed Tables, Walking Sticks, all at 'Low Low Prices') and on the upper floors there's a Job Shop which offers 'jobs for local people'. At least they don't use the term 'indigenous'. Aside from the tacit racism, it doth protest too much – the implication is that there's something to prove here, that when they aren't loudly pointing it out, housing and jobs might not be going to 'locals'. But in light of the way a

huge swathe of Barking has been redeveloped neither in the interests of council tenants nor of the incomers pushed here by rising rents and housing clearances in Tower Hamlets and Newham, and looking too at how large-scale and blaring the private development was, you have to wonder who is fooling who here.

Enterprise Interzone

Getting yourself onto the Docklands Light Railway – a bus to Beckton will do the trick – you can now explore the effects of the Enterprise Zones of the 1980s and 90s, and their remnants and extensions today. The first notable place you will come across is the University of East London, whose tubular, brightly-painted halls of residence you could not fail to notice. Get off here (Cyprus Station, evocatively) and you can find a place which sums up very well the New Labour approach to Higher Education. You'll notice first of all the things about it that are reasonably laudable. 'UEL' is a very long way from University College, and its proportion of working-class students is second-only to the far less coherent and definable London Metropolitan University, scattered from Holloway to Minories. It's a campus, very much on the pattern of the 'plate glass Universities' of the 1960s, with all possible amenities, so that in theory you would hardly need to leave, which is helpful given the location. The masterplan and the design are courtesy of 'organic modernists' Edward Cullinan and Partners; Mr Cullinan worked with Denys Lasdun on the University of East Anglia in the 1960s, the most architecturally impressive of the Wilson-era universities, and some of that ability to create a strange and distinctive integration of architecture and place can be felt here. The public squares and undulating classrooms, offices and 'simulated trading floors' of UEL open out towards the runway of London City Airport; in fact, the Library has a direct view of planes taking off and landing. It's easy to attack this as the effect of planning policies that don't give a damn about where they dump the lower orders, and yet there is something deeply special and haunting about this place – the University at the end of the world. Given that the funding cuts to the universities are mainly a frontal assault on expanded ex-polytechnics like

UEL, it is also the last of a species on the verge of extinction. If it were not such an epitome of a segregated education system, it'd be easier to mourn it.

The airport and the University are both the direct consequence of the closure of the Royals, the last docks within 'official' London; we have passed on our route through North Kent several docks and wharves operated by the Port of London Authority, but they're safely out of sight and unremarked. The Royals – the Royal Victoria Dock, King George V Dock, and Royal Albert Dock – were gigantic engineering undertakings, designed to take ocean liners, that were finally made obsolete by containerization as late as the early 1980s. Because of their vastness – wider than the Thames itself at times – they cannot make up a pretty marina, in the same fashion as the more narrow stretches of water in Rotherhithe or the Isle of Dogs. Whatever happens here has to factor in the prodigious scale of the Royals, something which usually leads to an obvious recourse – the Really Big Shed. The most interesting place to explore the Royals, aside from the disconnected enclave of UEL, is via a long path through the district of Silvertown. The place to begin, which is helpfully just outside the DLR stop for City Airport, is the Tate & Lyle refinery. This must be the largest extant industrial complex left in East London. It still makes Golden Syrup, and scatters its sweet, sticky smell across tiny terraces and system-built GLC tower blocks. You are very close here to the wealth of Canary Wharf, but trickle-down has, surprisingly enough, failed to take effect. The best walk is along the former route of the North London Line, the overground railway that was closed less than a decade ago, replaced by a DLR extension and, putatively, Crossrail. This disused railway offers a view of some very melancholic spaces indeed: the Tate Institute, a boarded-up Arts and Crafts building that has met a very different fate to the sugar baron's more famous cultural endeavours upriver. The memorial to the Silvertown explosion, a First World War accident that destroyed much of the area. Lyle Park, a small green space tucked in between foul-smelling chemical works, which has the former gates of the Harland and Wolff shipyard left as ornament. Looking over it all is a church by S.S Teulon, the wild proto-Brutalist mid-Victorian architect. It now

houses the geographically absconding ‘Brick Lane Music Hall’, and it’s still a staggering work of architecture, a freakish monster of banded brick and thuggish stone, rising to a squat, monstrous tower, bursting with an uncanny, guttural power. It’s a surrealist church for a surrealist landscape.

After this, redevelopment begins. Sandwiched between the Royals and the Thames is one of the best of the yuppiedromes, at least for its sheer scenographic quality – Barrier Park, and its adjoining housing, Barrier Point. The park overlooks, as the name implies, the technology that has saved London from more than one flood; its placement is an admiring gesture, imploring you to gaze upon it and boggle. The park itself has been taken relatively seriously as a piece of design; a cubic pavilion café sits in the centre, and a sunken garden where the dock used to be is a collection of abstracted topiary which perfectly accompanies the sheer bloody weirdness of the surrounding landscape. The flats have a stepped section down to the park, which makes them much more well-mannered than is customary – they’re best on a foggy day, when you can’t see how penny-pinchingly cheap the detailing is. They’re a project by Barratt Homes, and were pretty pivotal in making clear that volume housebuilders could adapt to the new aspirational privatized modernism with some ease. Pass under the DLR bridge, and you pass through their earlier work in the Dockside Enterprise Zone – Prince-friendly closes and cul-de-sacs, with lots and lots of parking space for very big cars. A gaunt concrete grain silo is a hint that there are remnants nearby, a whisper which becomes a scream when you reach Millennium Mills. This magnificent inter-war Flour Mill was always lurking here to demarcate where regeneration stopped; Sir Terry Farrell was hired to come up with ideas for it, and proposed flats combined with an aquarium, to be called ‘Biota!’ A very high, spindly, wobbly and bracing cable-stayed bridge now brings you to the more fully yuppified part of the Royals.

This revolves around the ExCel conference centre, the favoured heavily-guarded location for an annual Arms Expo. The building’s first stage, a giant hangar with a Rogers-esque external frame, has recently been extended by Nicholas Grimshaw, meaning that ExCel is now roughly the size of a small town. In



its train are heartless, overdeveloped, architecturally nugatory luxury flats, many of them high-rise and higher, plus hotels for conference delegates and a small bit of re-used Victorian warehousing. I've only managed to get inside ExCel once, for an event called 'EcoBuild', where various destructive multinationals show off their experiments in green technology, but mainly exploit the occasion as an excuse to promote and sell other more or less sustainable wares to the building industry. Various countries have their own stalls, where they tell you a little bit about how they're lowering carbon emissions and a lot about how you really ought to invest in them. Surrounded by motorways and pylons, just under an airport, it's a little hard to take. Get on the train here at Custom House DLR, try not to be frisked by security, and then make your way to a place that should, in theory, be very different.

Poplarism Revisited

The Borough of Poplar, absorbed during the 1960s into Tower Hamlets, gave the political lexicon the phrase 'Poplarism'. It describes the stand against central government made by Labour councillors under the later Labour leader George Lansbury, when

they continued to improve working-class health and housing no matter how much the screws were put on them. ‘Better to break the law than to break the poor’ was their slogan and defence. Every municipality that has tried to take on the government since has appealed in some way to their example. The LCC that tried to ‘build the Tories out of London’, the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire, Militant Liverpool, Livingstone’s ‘loony left’ GLC. Some on that list were more successful than others, and ‘Socialism in One Borough’ was always a bit of a stretch, but Poplar did win significant victories. Labour might not have taken the whole of London in the 1930s without their example, and the huge amount of public housing in Poplar today is surely evidence of how seriously they took their task. Some might feel it a shame that none of the old, seedy, dockland Poplar survives today, but the Poplarists would have seen that as a resounding success. Their determination to take on the government contrasts with the current craven stance of councils forced to implement the most extreme cuts. The option to fight is there, if they are willing to risk the court cases and prison sentences. The fact that the current Mayor of Tower Hamlets, Lutfur Rahman, presents himself as a left-of-Labour diehard, suggests that there may be contemporary potential here too, though Respect, the left-of-Labour party that once nearly took control of the council, has disintegrated almost completely, with some of its councillors even joining the Tories.

Poplarism’s built legacies are not always well treated by Tower Hamlets council, it must be noted. Poplar Town Hall, an art deco building with a Socialist Realist frieze of local trades and workers, is now Bow Business Centre, a gratuitous but typical insult. Poplar Baths are derelict. The estates are often very good indeed, whether the mansion flats or incongruous cottages built under Lansbury himself or the Cockneyfied modernism of the Attlee government’s Lansbury Estate, but the boarded-up or rotting high streets in between them are not models of a surviving socialist enclave. The DLR runs up, down and across, trying gamely to make the place more coherent. The work of Tower Hamlets itself, the later 1960s system-built estates, make a depressing complement to the yuppie fistulae that have shot off from the bowels of Canary Wharf. And the Mini-Manhattan

there is an entirely inescapable presence. If you really want to see the London that neoliberalism built at its Brazilified worst, at its most brutally segregated and stratified, if you want to make yourself unconscionably angry, you must go to where Poplar meets Canary Wharf. The Docklands Light Railway, several car parks, the Blackwall Tunnel approach and the Crossrail building site slice the area in two. On one side, towers of trading floors and ‘luxury flats’; on the other the crumbling remnants of public housing. Among these remnants is Robin Hood Gardens.

This estate of two long, curving blocks was designed by Alison and Peter Smithson in 1969, and is scheduled for demolition by owners Tower Hamlets Council. When it was built, it was already seen as dated. It derived from the Smithsons’ ideas for the Golden Lane bombsite just outside the Square Mile, where rather than just dropping blocks in parkland, they would try and design something that had the intuitive, dense, warm communal life of the areas that had been bombed and that were being cleared as slums. These ideas were properly implemented by largely unheralded architects at Sheffield City Council; the Smithsons’ own version was, curiously, far less tectonically or socially convincing, for all the architects’ relentless theorizing and self-promotion. Park Hill is a world-class masterpiece, Robin Hood Gardens its slightly gawker, provincial cousin. However, you don’t demolish somewhere just for being somewhat architecturally unresolved. When Tower Hamlets announced their intention to pull it down, *Building Design* launched a petition and a very high-profile campaign – a brave move on the part of editor Amanda Baillieu, one which put them out on a limb when rivals like the *Architects’ Journal* sniffily disassociated themselves from the campaign, aligning themselves with the advocates of class cleansing. It’s here that things get complicated.

Tower Hamlets has a massive shortage of council housing, which should be enough to make the case for the buildings’ renovation. Yet signatories to the petition, ranging from self-help philosophers to property developers, were all too keen for it to be restored in a similar manner to formerly council-owned buildings like Denys Lasdun’s Keeling House, where ‘restoration’ meant privatization and the expulsion of tenants, or

Bloomsbury's Brunswick Centre, where a majority of the inhabitants are actually designers. Accordingly Tower Hamlets were able to play people's champion, claiming that their proposals – selling off the site and increasing density sevenfold, with no guarantee that tenants could return bar a vague commitment to some 'affordable' housing in its replacement⁸ – would put 'people before buildings'. Tower Hamlets have repeatedly claimed that their coffee-morning consultations show that a majority of residents want the place demolished, but a recent survey carried out by a long-term tenant found 80 per cent wanted it renovated and refurbished.⁹ Described by its architects as 'a building for the socialist dream', the estate sits oddly next to a world centre for unrestrained capitalism. The estate is run-down, with virtues and flaws like any other – its famed 'streets in the sky' clearly work well, for example, with residents chatting and leaving their doors open, at least during the day. The stairwells are harshly claustrophobic, unlike the sensitively designed lift lobbies. The concrete, which picks up light beautifully, is harsh to the touch on the exterior walls, smoothing down to a soft, clean surface when you get to the entrances of the flats; which are poky, albeit nowhere near as poky as the average contemporary 'luxury flat'. A random pattern of concrete slats gives off a threatening ambience, offset by vegetable gardens and a spacious park. The Blackwall Tunnel approach road passes adjacent, defeating even the most impressive attempt at creating a humane environment. It's a strange place, but by no means an unsalvageable one – if you ignore its place at the heart of a class war over London's space. Robin Hood Gardens' likely successors have been decided upon, designed by multinational hacks Aedas after several London firms publicly called for a boycott of the competition: there will be architecturally nondescript, internally cramped 'executive' high-rises. Few seem interested in defending the place as viable council housing. The real story here is not about the qualities or otherwise of big concrete buildings, but about the uninterrupted denigration of council housing and the expansion of London's second financial district.

Tower Hamlets are, it must be admitted, over a barrel. Hugely underfunded, running one of the poorest places in Europe, they

have evidently decided that selling their land and desperately crossing their fingers that some of their voters will get rehoused in the ‘affordable’ units will help keep the wolf from the door. The Housing Associations have no such excuse. Next to Robin Hood Gardens is the Brownfield Estate, designed by Hungarian architect and Communist fellow-traveller Erno Goldfinger, who moved in here for a few months to make sure everything worked properly. As a piece of architecture, it achieves with ease all the things which the Smithsons fussed over. The flats are large and simple, the bared concrete is beautiful, detailed with a craftsman’s obsessiveness, the communal areas largely make sense, and the buildings have an impressive sense of order and controlled drama. Much of it is undemonstrative low-rise flats, with concrete frames and brick infill, but the three buildings that always get noticed are more, well, ‘iconic’. Glenkerry House is a ten-storey tower with services on top that are modelled like a work of Constructivist sculpture; it is owned by a residents’ co-operative, so is exempt from the current redevelopment. Carradale House is a long, low concrete block connected by external walkways, thrown out to a futurist length, angled around the central image – the vertiginous Balfron Tower, which skyscrapes its way up to overlook much of East London. It’s often seen as the first draft of Goldfinger’s slightly later Trellick Tower, but it’s a design all of its own, animating its attempt to protect residents from the din and ugliness of the Blackwall approach without the clumsy, fortress-like enclosure resorted to by the Smithsons. It has, however, had done to it what many of Robin Hood Gardens’ advocates have demanded.

After one of those desultory low-turnout ballots of residents, the estate was given to a housing association, Poplar HARCA, with the usual promises that only they could renovate the flats to a decent standard after so many decades of neglect. What they did instead was move out the existing residents, move in artists (who did a few projects about the departing tenants) and propose to demolish most of the low-rise housing in the estate, leaving only the icons. In this case the residents weren’t even ‘decanted’, or given the promise that they could come back, because apparently they had not asked to be rehoused here. Though of course there will be an ‘affordable’ percentage of the renovated flats when

they do emerge. This is where the political conformism that still, maddeningly, pervades local authorities gets us: a clearance either way, but you can choose your style of class cleansing, from stunning development to preserved 1960s heritage. And where will the residents end up? Why, in the outer reaches of the Thames Gateway, of course, in nondescript little closes stuck on the edges of motorways in Barking or Thurrock. It all starts to look like a deliberate plan – space is freed up in the inner city, and new space is allocated in the exurbs. Crossrail will get the cleaners back in from Essex, and get the bankers from Maidenhead to Canning Town. There is, as a walk around Poplar makes clear, always an alternative. If the elected representatives who were supposed to stop this can't or won't, if in fact they prove themselves complicit and willing, then there are the options of either despair or riot. The rioters got about as far as Bow, last time.

The Olympian Landscape

The reason why this is all able to occur is easy enough to discern; it's there in front of you, everywhere you turn in Poplar, with that air-traffic alerting light flashing on and off the pyramid at the top, winking mockingly at you. Canary Wharf, like the first City, is breaking its banks, and spreading bankster colonies all over the borough of Tower Hamlets. As we have grown to expect, the financial crisis they triggered (Lehman Brothers and AIG did their naughtiest things here) has not led to any noticeable contrition or humility. From Poplar we could make our way into the Isle of Dogs itself, to peruse its glass and steel, or to jeer at the way that the kitsch of the '80s still sits around it, dating the place horribly; we could walk around the mean, low-ceilinged shopping mall that sits under the central phallus of One Canada Square, the pyramidal erection dubbed at the time 'Thatcher's Cock'. We won't, however. We'll head away from this Thatcherite landscape with its Fosterian Blairite appendages to a much purer space of New Labour, just to finally give them their due, for their most large-scale experiment in the planning of a wholly new, *tabula rasa* district of the capital.

I ought to be brief, or as brief as possible, on the subject of



the Olympic Site. Being based south of the river I try and avoid the place, but architectural correspondents who live and work in East London, like Douglas Murphy, Kieran Long or Oliver Wainwright, have all written superb and detailed indictments of the place, have buried it time and again, although admittedly without managing to shame the Olympic Delivery Authority into the hoped-for mass resignation. By the time you read this it may all be over, the fireworks, the pageants, the unmanned drones, the stationing on-site of US missiles, the enormous police and army presence, the medals or not-medals, the terrorist attacks or not-terrorist attacks. That doesn't matter. It's all about the Legacy. Ken Livingstone admitted as much several times – the point was not to have a sports event in London, the point was to extort some funding for the redevelopment of a massive swathe of derelict London, a light-engineering swathe along the river Lea that had long since gone to seed, a typical stretch of Thames Gateway post-industry.

And why not? Many writers have mourned the demise of the Lea Valley, London's last great wilderness. I remember it well, the paths along the outfall sewer, the random collections of industrial waste, the abundant and unusual bird and plant life; there are still a few similar spaces on the other side of the Thames, and practically dozens outside of London. Nonetheless, there was a uniqueness to the Lea Valley Zone, and the effacement of it by

an enormous project of speculation and imposed redevelopment is hard to conceive as a victory for the people of London. Just imagine, though, if the GLA was the GLC, a well-funded, powerful body able and willing to stand up to the City and the government, and they proposed to redevelop this area. Imagine that they too used an Olympics as a pretext, and connected the new suburb to the DLR, the Jubilee Line, Crossrail and even the railway to the Continent. Imagine that the country's most famous architects were hired, by subterfuge or otherwise, to design its public buildings, while an immense landscaping project provided a new public park. Imagine that a rigorously planned new housing development with a secondary school as part of it was an integral part of this new district. I can't say I'd protest. More than that, I can say I'd be the first to hail the bloody place as everything London desperately needs, especially impoverished, overcrowded, overstretched East London. I'd be declaring Ken Livingstone the greatest living Englishman, the man who used running, swimming and shot-putting as the pretext to build a magnificent new city for the masses of London. It isn't a particularly useful thought experiment, as this isn't what is happening. All of the above features in Olympic Stratford in *some* manner, but all of it is coming into being as an act against London – the creation of yet another security-obsessed, enclosed, gated enclave set up to mock the idea that we could become more rather than less equal.

The new Stratford is really several different sites, all of them distinct, fitting into a larger plan. There is the redevelopment of Stratford High Street into a series of speculative high-rise towers; there is the 'town centre', a huge enclosed Westfield shopping mall; there is the Olympic Village, a housing development to accommodate the athletes, their PAs and associated bureaucrats; and there is the Olympic Site itself, a flowing park dotted with sports facilities by various architects. They don't fit together terribly well, but all of them are in their own way extremely ambitious. The biggest, although in design terms by far the worst part, is Stratford High Street. Under the laissez-faire jurisdiction of the London Borough of Newham, a half-dozen or more towers have sprouted atop an already congested and miserable

thoroughfare. Lower buildings, of so poor a spatial standard and build quality that they resemble clumsily re-clad council estates rather than new buildings, occupy the spaces in between. The towers are nearly all by the same firm, Pseudomodernists Stock Woolstonecroft, who were surely as surprised as anyone when they were essentially allowed to build an entire Mini-Manhattan of buy-to-let hutches with catchy names – Aurora! Icona! Each tower is clad in multiple tacky materials, the usual trick for hiding the fact that there’s no orientation to the sun, no double-aspect flats, and a whopping great big dual carriageway just below your pink aluminium balcony.

The Olympic Village itself would be entitled to look down its nose at such things. Although the development was widely ridiculed for the fact that the athletes’ dormitories were so small that it would be difficult to sell the flats on, even in the country with the lowest space requirements in Europe, this publicly-funded development has been bought up in toto by Qatari Diar, who can presumably knock through the partitions in these concrete-framed blocks. They are as uniform and ordered as Stratford High Street is chaotic and headstrong; mostly of around eight storeys, often masonry clad with expensive materials, with individual plots let to some fairly respected architects. The result is uniform in a rather scary way. From the Westfield car park, it resembles the peripheral estates of the late Soviet Union, which also stood in public squares at eight-to-ten storeys, and which were also often surrounded with an indeterminate kipple. Nearly every architect has taken the same approach to softening that sense of regimentation, and unfortunately it’s the biggest cliché in the contemporary architect’s book – the barcode façade, the staggered fenestration that apparently makes a big building look less monumental, which of course means that you do not perceive that bigness as a virtue, but rather as something that the designers are embarrassed about (to see how it’s done, take a trip to the Brownfield Estate). Only one architect has tried to have a bit of fun with his very limited parameters – Niall McLaughlin, who has covered his eight storeys in prefabricated panels taken from casts of the Parthenon Frieze, an elaborate and almost amusing joke about the dichotomy here between prefabrication and craftsmanship. Next to all of this is

a very large, AHMM-designed City Academy, so that wealthy parents don't have to worry about their kids mixing with the most multiracial and multicultural place that has ever existed in human history. Who knows, they might have learnt something.

As there is a school, so there is a local shopping centre. There was and is already a big covered mall in Stratford, the deeply unlovely Stratford Centre, an overdeveloped and overscaled brick-clad monolith that one of the Olympic site's public sculptures is specifically designed to hide. You can't quite hide it from Westfield Stratford City itself, though, as it is directly opposite. The Westfield is a typical example of the Mall as it is now practised. There are 'streets' outside as well as enclosed passageways, and there is an office-block skyline on top to try and make it look more like a place. Inside is an unpretentious consumption factory, which has made none of the AA-student deconstructivist gestures that the cousin mall in Shepherd's Bush condescended to provide for the roving eye. It's just a big mall, like every other big mall, but with a few little concessions to contemporary taste. On the lowest level is the 'market', where dun-coloured tiles let you know that you're somewhere homely; lots of boutique chain shops, the *Guardian*-reader sort that you might otherwise see outside the Festival Hall or inside St Pancras International. This bit is obviously for the residents of the Olympic Village; the rest services and/or leeches on the more workaday tastes of East London and Essex. On the way to the toilets, a wall features several photographs of old East London Markets, an appeasing of the slain ancestors that is even more profoundly evil than in Bluewater.

What of the Olympic site itself? Everything is dominated by the ArcelorMittal Orbit, a shocking pink entrail laterally curved around an observation tower, famously commissioned by Boris Johnson in the toilets of a fundraising dinner from steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, who provided the metal in return for the monument being named after him. There's a faintly sick irony in this ex-industrial zone being overlooked by an edifice dedicated to a prolific downsizer and asset-stripper of factories¹⁰, but that aside, there are buildings to enjoy, if you can keep from your mind the town-planning abortion that has been wreaked upon Stratford.

You can enjoy the way that Michael Hopkins's velodrome manages to be far more impressive and flowing a space than Zaha Hadid's similar, but far more expensive Aquatics Centre, with its ungainly temporary wings. You can admire the economy of steel members in the Olympic Stadium itself. There's a good brick substation by Nord. If you think that's enough, good luck to you. Counterfactuals aside, when sticking to the neoliberal orthodoxy it's hard to imagine that this could have been different. Some of the buildings might have been better, the social condenser for the new suburb might not have been a big box mall, there might have been more 'affordable' housing, but hold them to their own terms and that's about all you can really throw at the GLA or the ODA. This is why they are not fit to even begin to speak about their forebears in Poplar. They conformed, they fell into line, and they even seem to feel proud of it. Someone else has to fight for the forces their Party once claimed to represent. In the meantime, there's a ready-made, enclosed yuppie New Town here just ready to be used as a post-apocalyptic film set. Dystopia for rent. No DHSS.



Chapter Two

Teesside: Infantilized Hercules

Railway Valhalla

Certain parts of the UK, according to the eminently sane, stable and sustainable south-eastern government, are a problem. Something has happened to them. They have become ‘dependent’. At some point they had industry, and then they lost it. How that happened is of no concern of us, but we note that many of them today are either unemployed, or employed by the ‘public sector’. Both are signs that these areas are parasitic. They are not standing on their own two feet. None of these places are in the South East England that the government (partly) represents, but we will find many of them in this book: Northern Ireland, South Wales, the industrial West Midlands. One of the places most often mentioned in this connection is the conurbation centred on the river Tees, in North East England, a smaller, younger, even less favoured cousin to the more northerly Tyne and Wear.

Teesside’s largest town, Middlesbrough, was thrown up with great speed in the second half of the nineteenth century, and was based around metalworking and shipbuilding, and later chemicals. These three industries were spread across older towns like Stockton or Redcar or even younger ones like Billingham, where their remnants can still be found. Labour couldn’t or wouldn’t reindustrialize the place, but they did expand various kinds of public-sector employment, which partly filled the gap. Accordingly Teesside is now often held up as the double-dip recession’s ‘worst-hit’ area, with its already fairly low levels of

employment decimated by public-sector cuts; a report by credit rating pests Experian described it as the ‘least resilient’ place in the UK. Middlesbrough, when it was young and thrusting rather than an apparent industrial relic best left to rot, was described by William Gladstone as an ‘infant Hercules’. Now, David Cameron talks about ‘weaning’ this place from the teats of the state. Either way, the people who live here are treated as children. What is especially noticeable in Teesside, though, is that this ‘public sector’ has spent much of the last two decades trying to prop up, resuscitate, or bring into being a moribund or dead ‘private sector’ – regeneration companies and the sell-off of public assets to prompt property development, a new University to stimulate the ‘knowledge economy’, the building of art galleries to attract ‘creative capital’ and of shopping malls to inculcate consumerism. The public/private divide never looked so false as it does here, where the ‘public sector’ has long worked doggedly for the private, thus far without obvious reward.

The lack of reward may be partly due to a lack of infrastructure, which is ironic given the area’s primacy in the development of mechanized transport. As if to stress how low Middlesbrough is in the national pecking order, there isn’t a direct train here from the capital – it must surely be the largest town in the UK not to be connected to the Wen. But the route to it, roughly along the line of the river Tees itself, is notable. The East Coast Main Line from London to Aberdeen stops in Darlington Station, a great introduction to why this place is worth caring about. Darlington Station has a claim to being one of the most beautiful railway sheds on the entire network, a sombre, smoky and atmospheric place with a majestic series of curving vaults, a piece of Victorian high-tech whose beauty and emptiness are captivating. The reason for its grandeur is commemorative. It was designed like this in the late nineteenth century as a tribute to the fact that railways as currently understood were invented here, in the form of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. Fading British Rail signs tell you that ‘The concept of public rail transport with locomotives originated in this town’, developing out of a coal transporting mechanism. The 1977 signs are now themselves period pieces. Their elegant modernist typography contrasts with vivid, scribbled drawings

of navvies, various forms of antiquated locomotive, coal staithe and coaches. Something absolutely epochal happened here, and we're told so, albeit very quietly. From there you hop onto the extremely basic, privatized, two-carriage Northern Rail trains eastwards; a rickety reminder that this invention is no longer valued in its country of origin. Under the last government there was talk of a Tees Valley 'Metro' to rectify this. It was to be an upgrade of the existing line with a couple of new stations, and unlike a real metro it hardly served residential areas, but any new public transport outside of London is rare enough to make it worthwhile. It was supposed to be ready by 2012, but was an early and unsurprising casualty of the cuts.

Strange emotional and aesthetic things were once invested in the railways; Middlesbrough Station's hybrid of worn, laconic post-war terminal and jolly Falstaffian seventeenth-century palace is a case in point. The private transport system that replaced them has an equally irrational and grandiose presence in 'Boro. The first sights of the town are of busy, ornamental Victorian commerce, but soon you're confronted by a red brick flyover – a rare and ghastly instance of a 'contextual motorway'. It was ploughed through the town in the 1980s by the unaccountable Tees Valley Development Corporation, as part of the Enterprise Zone enforced the last time Teesside was in this much trouble, but given the change in architectural fashion it was not the expected sweeping, brutal concrete viaduct. Far from it. Where it meets the town it slices in half we find some neo-Georgian brick detail, and underneath are small buildings with neoclassical pediments. Inside one is what looks like a deeply insalubrious nightclub. It's a lovely example of post-industrial dishonesty; a structure which of necessity sucks the life out of a town, presented as a cap-doffing tribute to it. 'Enjoy Yourself', reads the sign outside the club.

Iron Grid

That aside, Middlesbrough is a unique and curious thing. There are two attempts at building a town here, one of them north of the railway tracks, which fell on hard times and is now being 'regenerated', and which we will deal with presently; and the

current town centre, to the south of it. It's blank-slate urbanism, a near-grid pattern of parallel streets with main roads run through laterally, imposed on what is an unusually flat plain by the standards of northern England. Having spent much of my childhood in a railway town on the south coast built around the same time with exactly the same grid and much of the same architecture, I feel instantly at home here. The same shops, the same non-conformist churches (one of them, neo-Romanesque, housing The Money Shop). The same terraces in the centre and villas just outside. The same working men's clubs and '80s postmodernist shopping malls, all in the same red brick. The architecture might have tried to look traditional, but there's nothing at all higgledy-piggledy or pretty about Middlesbrough – famously so. It is dour, but not without interest for that.

Partly that interest comes from the open grid that draws the eye to the dales beyond; partly from the subtle differences in cuisine. It is traditional for southern journalists to make a great deal in Teesside of the dish known as the 'parmo', consisting of a chicken escalope with layers of Parmesan cheese (or optional extras) slathered onto it, served with chips and salad. I won't break ranks on this issue. Parmos are ubiquitous all along the Tees, from Billingham to Redcar, though they have not travelled as yet. I ended up eating a Lebanese parmo, which was delicious, and I ate every last morsel of it. It isn't altogether surprising that there is a chain of restaurants here called 'Fatso's'. That said, few young people look obese, as such; rather, lots of people look very much like the sons and daughters of steelworkers, formidable and barrel-chested rather than glumly over-consuming. But the town's culinary reputation fixes it as an emblem of post-industrial decline as much as the disused factories – cue horrified anthropological disquisitions on fat proles signing on and picking up a parmo en route to a day in front of *Trisha*. Combine that with the town's elected mayor being a populist ex-policeman who invited NATO to bomb a local council estate and aims to create a 'designer label city'; add the fact that the CCTV cameras often feature loudspeakers to yell at miscreants, and the situation seems even more alarming than it actually is.

Architecture critics dropping by for some Regeneration are

prone to claiming there was nothing here to see before – (fill in building as appropriate), but now the poor sods have got some culture to lift their spirits. There is one moment here that is as great as anything anywhere, and that’s the juxtaposition of George Gordon Hoskins’s Northern Gothic Town Hall – the town’s second, a darkling presence on the skyline – with the Corporation House office block (now ‘Centre North East’), a precise and elegant Mies van der Rohe imitation. The soot-blackened belfry meets black smoked glass. Middlesbrough has plenty of very bland post-war office blocks offloaded here as indifferently as anywhere else, but this one takes hold of the place, centres it, ennobles it. Opposite the two black towers is a lower-rise civic complex, its expressed frame modelled in Brutalist-medieval steel and concrete, and you’re reminded that modernism is quite capable of adjusting itself to context without making any gestures at local materials, details, features and gob-ons, without being ingratiating or patronizing. What, though, if that context is a somewhat bleak, dour industrialism; what does it mean for those working in the call centre that occupies much of the tower? Later buildings in central Middlesbrough respond to its murky, autumnal context by either wishing they were elsewhere, or returning to the grimmest off-the-peg solutions. Three towers in the centre of the town make that especially clear: a Thistle Hotel and two blocks of student halls of residence, which are among the bleakest things I have ever seen – remarkable indeed, given their vaguely aspirational function. All three are clad with grey and black material, and have the most unbelievably tiny windows. The assumption is evidently that what you’re going to see outside is so awesomely miserable that it’s best to ignore it altogether. You could hardly get an hour of daylight through them (I tried to squint through, and could just about make out the cooling towers) but their saddest effect is not interior but exterior. They try their best to suck whatever life they can out of the surrounding area. ‘Luxury Student Apartments, available Now.’

The planned town’s extremities show two of its post-industrial strategies. To the south behind the student flats is Teesside University, under the frankly improbable banner ‘Britain’s Favourite University – *Sunday Times*’. Architecturally, there’s

a squat, pugnacious Gothic clock tower, some rather chic pop-modern plastic-clad buildings from its earlier life as a polytechnic, and Blair-era constructions consisting of the usual set of cladding materials thrown at a frame. The University is what will take Middlesbrough into the future. A faint hint of patronage is strengthened by the proximity of the Dorman Museum, an ill-proportioned sandstone-domed museum to the local steel magnate. To the north, past a neo-Victorian mall and a small but incongruously well-designed and maintained 1980s council estate showing the influence of Ralph Erskine's Byker Estate in Newcastle, the dereliction starts. A very large area of terraced housing has been subjected to the 'Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders', the New Labour scheme that entailed the compulsory purchase or expulsion and subsequent demolition of working-class areas and the building of new houses for a better class of clientele. There are acres of tinned-up terraces, but it's done in a strange order, best known to the city authorities – one side of a street derelict, another not, so that residents have to walk through this every day. The council are taking absolutely no chances with the possibility that these empty houses could be seized by anyone not sufficiently aspirational – each metal door features a sign reading 'This property has been cleared of all its contents including pipework and STAIRS'. The problem is, the Pathfinder scheme was cancelled. There will be no funding for replacements. This is the element of the strategy that was supposed to create a local property market. However, it'd be unfair to suggest that Middlesbrough's goals have been solely material. In fact, they've been 'thinking big', in the parlance.

The first sign of this is right in the heart of town, just behind the Town Hall and Centre North East. That is, the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, or (lower-case) *mima*. The acronym looks towards MoMA, and the Institute itself looks towards the Continent, more specifically an architect more commonly found working in Amsterdam, Hamburg or Moscow than in Middlesbrough, the Dutch designer Erick van Egeraat. Egeraat is one of those architects whose speciality is making the simple look complicated – linear office blocks and towers with patterned slices, cuts and rashes all over them. He is a signature architect,



that signature being a painterly slash, which is liberally applied to mima. It could have been absolutely anywhere, but then so could those miserly student flats; the significance of the ‘anywhere’ here is quite different, in that here ‘Boro apparently has something with the high quality – or rather, with the star quality – that you’ll find in a fully fledged metropolis. It is little more than a box, dropped in the public green behind the Town Hall and the law courts, but there are two features that are wholly and indubitably ‘iconic’: one is a roof terrace, from which you can see exactly how strangely linear and rationalized the town’s plan is, and the other is a stairway that takes up a chunk of the façade, underneath a full-height glass wall, with that flamboyant upward slash to denote the architect’s hand. Inside, the light fittings and the handrails are even more obviously in the house style, constantly reminding you who did them – and fairly attractive they are too. The problem is the backside, never the part you’re supposed to look at in buildings like this; a distribution shed with thin E van E slices cut into it, lest you mistake it for being of the same ilk as the student flats. It’s not a building that is particularly likeable, largely for its shallowness and its lack of interest in the city around, not to mention its windowless, heartless gallery spaces, but it serves its function, one which is worth supporting – the scorn for provincial art galleries is largely dispensed by those who have never had their lives enriched or changed in one, at the age when such things are truly transformative. The exhibition showing when I was there,

Bonnie Camplin's 'Railway Mania', is an assemblage that shows far more engagement with Teesside than the building itself. The famous names, however, have better things to do, and so it is with the public art littered around outside. A great big Claes Oldenburg bottle sits outside, as a reference to famous local Captain Cook, apparently. Exalted art-historical provenance aside, it just looks like a lump of Regeneration kipple that could, again, have been created by anyone, anywhere. And that's the central problem – do you try to make an in-received-opinion-unpleasant place like this look 'better' by making it more like other, 'better' places, or do you try to make it more like itself?

Temenos, Hubris, Thanatos

This question might seem idle, given that the result is dereliction and emptiness either way. Middlehaven, over the other side of the railway, is the site of one of similarly 'signature' architect Will Alsop's many plans for post-industrial towns. It has a few things going for it – most obviously the becalmed remains of the old docks, and the magnificent, still-functioning Transporter Bridge. Posters and fences enclose a wasteland, although not much effort has been expended in keeping them up, revealing an absolutely huge, poisoned-looking grass expanse, broken up by two buildings and a public sculpture. Here you can see that Middlesbrough's civic planners really couldn't be faulted for lack of ambition – and this isn't intended as a jibe, as so many cities in the UK could be faulted for exactly that. Others have stumbled through their relentless mediocrity; here, the problems resulted from an attempt to transcend mediocrity, to make the town into something completely unique. Given the place's poor prospects – no investment in industry forthcoming, no likelihood of the new financial services economy creating an enclave here, no lawyers, no underwriters, no soon-to-be-CEOs – everything was staked on the 'creative class', that numinous entity described by the American theorist Richard Florida, who observes (accurately) that wherever 'creative' workers settle, be they bohemians or IT professionals, large sums of capital usually follow; but he implies (surely inaccurately) that anyone and anywhere can do it. It's

easy to ridicule it all, and the absurdism of the scheme wilfully courts derision. But in the absence of a central government with an industrial policy, what other choice did the city have?

The wager was that if 'Boro could do something absolutely spectacular on this post-industrial site – if Alsop, invited architects like FAT and invited artists like Anish Kapoor were given their head – then not only might the 'creatives' come, but it might even become a tourist destination. The renders in front of the wastes show a bouncy, bumptious, brightly coloured and brilliantly colourful Super Mario World. Some of the blocks on the hoarding are giant pink and yellow blobs, other more linear blocks dressed up with Swiss-cheese façades protrude on jetties out into the dock. There's an office block 'nicknamed' (by who exactly?) 'Marge Simpson's Hair'. A cinema shaped like a Rubik's Cube. Blocks intended to resemble Prada skirts. A 'digital museum' shaped like a Space Invader. Never mind a Claes Oldenburg sculpture, here we have an entire Pop Art District. It's perhaps the most outrageous and demented of all the boom's schemes, and like the boom itself, it was based essentially on gambling – not just the central gamble of the whole neoliberal project, or even the gamble of thinking Middlehaven itself could take it, but the fact that it was going to be centred on a 'super-casino'. All this blather, all these computer-generated images, all these blaring hoardings, all of it contrasts bitterly with what is in front of your nose. The 'public sector' (which, let's remember, is apparently hostile to the 'private sector'), in the form of quango Tees Valley Regeneration, levelled the area for, so far, very little. There's a completely nondescript out-of-town business park-style office block. There's an optimistic temporary property suite designed as an aptly upturned lime green box, and one completed new building – Middlesbrough College, by Hickton Madely at Archial. This is a huge building, and aside from the Bridge it dominates Middlehaven, its curving mass covered in a silver and yellow cladding, with small windows punched into it at random. Round the back, it's a huge white shed, as if we wouldn't be looking. Far away is the only other building on the site – the Docks' Clock Tower, attributed to William Morris's collaborator Philip Webb – tall, gaunt and profoundly haunting in this dreamlike, spacious



and sinister context. Between the patches of dereliction is landscaping in the colours of Middlesbrough FC and appropriately outsized benches with random globules of paint all over them, carrying at least some of the renders' cartoonish promise. They connect the area to the football stadium, and to another element of this ambitious scheme – Anish Kapoor's airy 'Temenos'.

This steel sculpture, made to stand up by celebrity engineer Cecil Balmond of Arup, launched Kapoor and Balmond's unexpected partnership as monumental sculptors to late British neoliberalism, but it is less embarrassing than their hot pink ArcelorMittalOrbit. A stretched tendon-trumpet, a Constructivist colon, it is typically both industrial and biomorphic, with the tautness between its opposed sides evidently a 'reference' to the Transporter Bridge nearby, still the most famous structure on Teesside. 'Creativity' might make reference to 'industry', but you still expect the former to be superior in the matter of aesthetics. But look around here at inner Middlesbrough's surviving industrial structures – the Bridge itself, its hard-Constructivist mesh belying a rare delicacy and lightness, so laconic in its use of metal that it almost seems to fade away entirely in the middle, a kinetic sculpture that carries cars and pedestrians out of the way of the

(absent) ships. Look at the shipbuilding cranes – a gantry crane of simplicity and power, another smaller crane full of crunching tension. Look also at the curvaceous maw of the distant cooling towers in Billingham, or the intertwined tentacles of the nearby chemical refineries. Cheat, and walk a mile up the road to the raw mechanical force of the Tees Newport Bridge. Look, really *look* at these objects, and then try to claim with a straight face that Kapoor and Balmond are better artists than these anonymous engineers. It might be the legible sense of need and utility that made the grunts of Dorman Long capable of such things. It's hard to conjure that purposefulness, that straining of sinew, out of property development, but, well, Alsop had a go.

The other four of the Five Giants' planned by Kapoor and Balmond might be a different matter, in the event that they are built. Now it's easy to imagine Teesside's south-eastern economic tutors ticking the place off for all this exorbitance, for what is surely a series of monumental follies. But with all this (private-sector, don't forget) industry falling into disuse, what else could revive the area than the property market, the country's biggest money-spinner? Middlehaven, unlike the thuggish Pathfinder schemes (but with the same end in sight), tries to kick off property speculation by appealing to art, heritage and tourism. If it won't work as a money-making scheme – and the area's desuetude rather suggests it won't – it's not down to political nonconformism, to the North refusing to follow the lead of the South into the new immaterial world of property and services. The place was originally commissioned and built by a regeneration quango, but the property collapse meant its takeover by the directly governmental Homes and Communities Agency and Middlesbrough Council. In late 2011, one new structure is nearly complete – 'Community in a Cube', by Essex-via-Merseyside postmodernists FAT, an ostensibly simple apartment block which reveals itself upon close inspection to have little Dutch-gabled houses growing out the top of it. This may well be the only part of the plan in Alsop's original, consumerist-surrealistic form, to actually get built.

Middlehaven is eerie and maddening, but it is not frightening. That honour is reserved for the truly alarming redevelopment of St Hilda's, slightly further along the river, just past the Transporter

Bridge. This would be a natural place for development, to try and rectify the fact that unlike Newcastle and Gateshead, Middlesbrough and Stockton do not cluster around their city-emblem bridges, but industry does, or did, instead. So similarly, a large area is being cleared, but here the process of erasure is even more partial, the landscape even more scarred. There are scattered industrial sheds, stumps of low-rise council housing (mostly boarded up and cleared), and the lonely 1840s Old Town Hall, amongst huge, yawning open scrubland, looking out towards the cooling towers. Three very angry-looking men with shaved heads and tattoos are walking purposefully through a place where nobody lives, which isn't reassuring. Short of doubling for a post-apocalyptic film set, it's hard to see what exactly this place is becoming, what exactly is being done here, what the purpose is of the clearance of its population. Then you find out, in the form of a sign that says 'BOHO ZONE', which it transpires is the name of a new neomodernist building to house arts organizations. It's the veritable front line of urban cool, and it's right next to the new police station.

Epsilon-Minus Semi-Moron

Teesside was the home of Brunner Mond, a large chemical concern that should be familiar to the millions who have read *Brave New World*. Aldous Huxley was inspired by a visit to Billingham, a 1920s New Town just outside Stockton-on-Tees and about ten minutes on the train from Middlesbrough; what he saw in their vast and advanced factory complex was so technically fascinating, and crucially so clean, so unusually *sterile*, that it contained the portents of a future industrial society. Not long after he was writing, Brunner Mond became Imperial Chemical Industries, a huge conglomerate, the largest in Britain – the ICI logo is surely instantly recognizable to anyone born here before 1990. The names of their products are equally nostalgia-inducing. Perspex, Dulux paint, Terylene, Crimplene. The conquest of nature, the transformation of oil or fabric into brightly coloured, mutable and improbable new substances, each given a catchy name. ICI died quietly in the 2000s, a late casualty of deindustrialization,

parcelled out between different buyers, alternately bought up and closed down, but its remnants are in many cases still going, in facilities along the Tees from Billingham to Wilton. They are acknowledged, in an oddly back-handed way, in an artwork by Peter Freeman in the centre of Middlesbrough, called ‘Spectra-txt’ – a steel column with twinkling lights that can be controlled by text message. It is, apparently, inspired by *Blade Runner*, as the story goes that Ridley Scott himself was inspired to create his twenty-first-century Los Angeles by the sight of the Wilton skyline – dozens of pipes and towers, neon-lit and topped by flares. That’s one local context which neither Alsop nor Egeraat cottoned on to.

Billingham itself is instantly recognizable by its skyline of concrete cooling towers, many of them still belching away – but the town itself is memorable, in its severely depressed way. It’s a private-sector New Town sponsored by a benevolent corporation, which should make clear how the state and the corporation were hardly at odds in the Keynesian settlement; but here, unlike at Middlehaven, we find not the public sector doing the work and spending the money that elsewhere private capital would pick up, but the reverse – a private company helping to create social housing and a local centre. Like all company towns, the result is a little uncanny, with that persistent hint of not-right. The station itself is basic in the extreme, a concrete shelter and bridge, leading to small houses and bungalows. After a little while, though, you find the planned town centre, created to accommodate ICI’s post-war expansion. Designed by local architects Elder, Lester & Partners, it is the space age coated in pigeon shit. The buildings are often fabulous, after you squint away the layers of filth. A brave new world all of its own, trying to ignore Huxley’s patrician concerns about a sterile and functional modernity.

It’s the same stuff you’ll find in any post-war town centre – pedestrianized shops interconnected by walkways, council housing towers and a local ‘arts’ centre – but most of them here were designed with a degree of wit that was not always present. That’s clear at the first part you see from the station, the two towers of Kennedy Gardens. These very wide tower blocks are closely akin to a current architectural fixation – the fashioning of

repetitive façades into irregular patterns of windows and balconies, the whole thing mounted on angular pilotis. The only major difference is that the equivalent on the Thames Gateway will have smaller flats and cleaner communal areas. The Jobcentre is spitting distance from the towers; here is a town where the menswear section in the charity shops sells large quantities of former industrial overalls. The centre, on the ground, is beaten-up and sad, but there are obvious traces of the modernist community that would have featured on the original drawings; most clear in the very elegant glass art gallery that stands opposite a Henry Mooresque family group. Evidently it was the mima of its time, and hence a good place to see what mima will look like in twenty years.

Then there's the walkways. Clamber up here and you get a spectacular view of the industrial landscape and of some very exciting car parking, and then you can walk along them into a covered shopping mall. You can see here how this kind of thing would lead to the mall as we now know it – covered from the elements, with shops on two levels – but it is something quite different in effect. The lighting is dim, the architecture is moody, the shops are mostly closed and the concrete has not been cleaned for what looks like a very long time. The shops here are also more interesting; you don't get bookshops in most malls, other than remainder bins or Waterstone's. The walkways can also lead you out into a pub called The Astronaut, which contains a 'Galaxy Lounge'. Smokers are sheltered by a Chandigarh bullhorn profile, and next door is a cylindrical tower block, Dawson House, as goofy and attractive as Kennedy Gardens. The graffiti on the public toilets round here is memorable. 'You've been BROCKD', reads one. There's one part of Elder, Lester & Partners' planned Billingham town centre that was given Grade II listing as a historically significant piece of architecture: Billingham Forum was the local ice-rink/arts centre/theatre, with a swooping, daringly engineered roof. That has stayed, but the original building was far too grey and sombre to be allowed to remain in its original state, so the whole thing has been reclad in bright yellow and blue, to create what a sign calls 'a Forum Fit 4 the Future'. This has a habit of happening to post-war listed buildings in the north of England. Listing them is evidently so controversial that permission is then

granted to transform them into completely different buildings, a dispensation seldom granted to country houses. Regardless, Billingham evidently once had several rather fine buildings that were state-of-the-art for their time. It doesn't seem to have done it any favours, beyond making it a worthwhile pilgrimage for fans of mid-century modernist design. That wasn't the original point.

The main ICI works had, even by this time, moved further along the Tees, to the other side of 'Boro – to Wilton, a village which suddenly found itself neighboured by a gigantic chemical complex. Driving out here, along a linear, Springsteenian freeway, the dales and the chimneys compete for attention, each of them equally irregular and harshly beautiful. The Wilton Centre, as it now is, doesn't generally welcome visitors, but I am here on an assignment related to the designers of their offices, as will become clear in the subsequent chapter. So I wait in a prefab, along with various (presumably) new employees watching very intricate safety videos, before learning that I'd come to the wrong entrance. I'm promptly picked up and driven to the Wilton Centre's main offices, a sharp contrast with the chaotic skyline of smoke-blackened cooling towers and metal pipes that dominates Wilton and dominated the young Ridley Scott's imagination. That, still, is something to truly boggle at – an assemblage that can't help but feel like a crazed accidental Gothic of asymmetrical towers, creeping pipes, platforms and buttresses and hissing menace, with each tower lit by several tiny little red lights.

Here, industry as wild and untamed mechanical outgrowth is replaced with a more Huxleyan image of industry become placid and semi-rural. This is one of the places that the Business Park, that exurban plague on the UK, begins, although the architecture is not usually this fine. ICI Wilton was one of the great last projects of Building Design Partnership, an architectural firm that was then a Gropius-influenced technocratic-socialist institution. I'm met by the site manager, who is happy to answer questions on the architecture and very frosty whenever that purview is exceeded. It transpires nonetheless that only part of the site is still operating, and it has been heavily hit by recession – but nor does it show any signs of closing down, and the smell makes it clear that somewhere petroleum is being transformed here into



something nature wouldn't want us to do, and that at least is mildly comforting, especially when fully familiar, as I am, with the safety procedures. ICI Wilton is the sort of building that is really meant to be seen from the car, as you drive through the trees towards it. The buildings are modernist, completely, and also completely Northern – red brick, tough, undemonstrative, but not Gradgrindian. Modernist public sculpture, meticulous green planting and an artificial lake, around which the red-brick wings angle themselves. As in the Bauhaus, the road runs under the building, which hauls itself up on pilotis to accommodate the cars underneath; the sort of thing not usually called for by the plan, but put there to create a feeling of motorcity modernity. Which it still does. This is the heart of a long-dead benevolent technocracy, a place where the Alphas felt secure.

Industrial and Inappropriate

The hopeless public transport system around here does have its advantages. Specifically, if you take the Northern Rail train out to the coast, to Redcar, it crawls along so slowly that you can survey at your leisure one of the great industrial landscapes. That's not

sarcasm, nor rhetorical exaggeration; in many ways, the most remarkable (non-)architectural objects on Teesside are here, in this long industrial belt stretching in an almost straight line to the sea. Each part of it has structures of heavy, overwhelming presence and complexity that are compelling, head-turning, at least if you're not used to such things. Take the earliest, the Dorman Long steelworks. It is here that various erstwhile 'ugly', now 'iconic' metal structures such as the New Tyne Bridge or Sydney Harbour Bridge were wrought. The concrete silos are equally ugly-iconic in their own way, especially the largest, a fluted, almost art deco creature with the company's name emblazoned proudly. Following that, there's the crowd of container cranes at Teesport, or the monumental boxes and spheres of the defunct BOC Gases. These especially are full of the kind of things that architects would love to be able to do but know they would never be allowed – huge bloody great external staircases making it look like half of the building has vanished into thin air, forms so pure and straightforward that they would be impossible to build without the application of multicoloured cladding; a power station of shocking density and weight, a terrifying beached monster rising improbably above semis. There's a specially-built train station, still, for the last of them – Redcar British Steel, serving the steelworks more recently owned by Corus, another accidental skyline of chimneys, sloping chutes and pipes. When you look up when these places closed, you realize just how long industry held out round here, and how much it was New Labour which presided over the endgame, for all their recent talk of 'producers' over 'predators'. BOC went out of business in 2005, ICI was finally wound up in 2008, Corus went in 2010. To prop them up, or to stop them being sold off and downsized, would presumably have been command economics, which is after all something best left for distressed financial institutions.

There's a tension in Redcar itself, in that it is a (down-at-heel) seaside resort overshadowed by a gigantic, if disused, steelworks. The seaside here is actually one of the most uncomplicatedly beautiful in the UK. Somewhere like Bournemouth had to import sand, but here there's a gorgeous arc of lushly yellow beach looking out at the North Sea. You can count the container ships in

the distance with both hands. So someone is making money here. The tall Victorian B&Bs on the other side have all gone to seed; the town was recently used as a film set for wartime Dunkirk. The town centre makes it very clear that Redcar captures two of the sadder fates available to the British town – the out-of-season seaside town and the industrial town when the industry has gone. It has seemingly countless boarded-up shops, but they have not been allowed to lower the tone of the area. Instead, they have been subjected to Redcar and Cleveland Council's 'Uplifting our Town Centres' programme – another of those public-sector strategies to cover up for the fact that the private sector has absconded with a large quantity of money. There are accordingly around a dozen 'Virtual' shops along the seafront and into the shopping precinct, with virtual shop signs and a virtual window, where you can see the goods that would virtually be here. Virtual Gift Shop (cursive typography, cards and trinkets). Virtual Sports Shop, full of virtual riot-worthy box-fresh trainers. And Virtual Fashion, which doesn't even try and simulate a shop underneath the hoarding, instead displaying a model parading around a well-appointed apartment. The actual shops are not much better – the wholly non-virtual The Adult Shop, for instance, which has in the window a figure that is part lady-of-the-night, part pink lampshade.

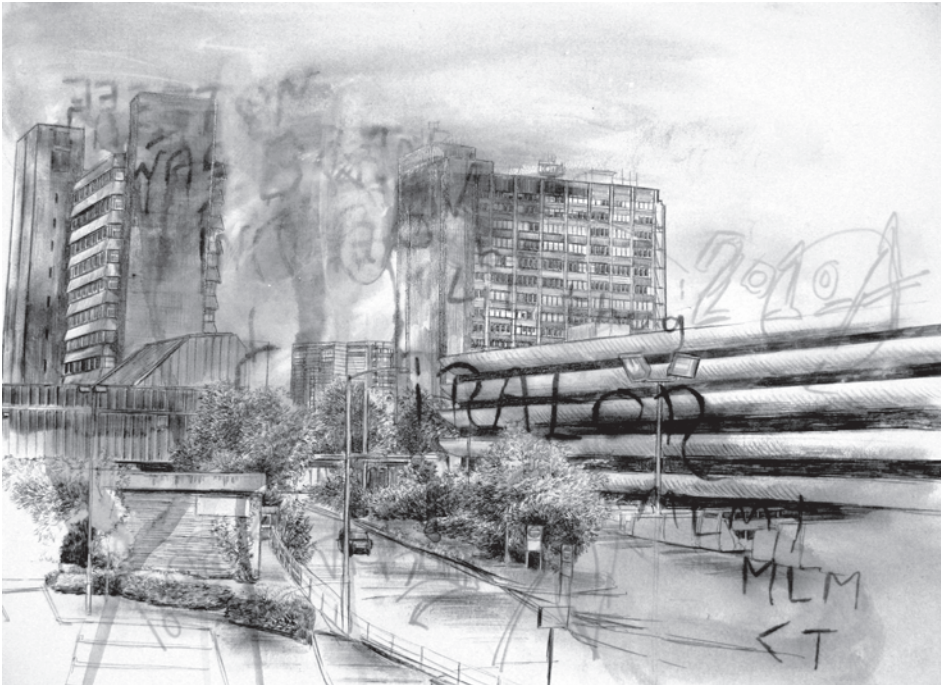
The town centre will soon feature something called The Hub, a derelict commercial building which signs tell us the council decided to 'do something with'. It will be (or was going to be) turned into a little piece of Alsop's imaginary Middlehaven, a big pink and blue 'business centre for the creative industries'. That's what's going to replace the steelworks, in case you were wondering. Florida on Tees, again. The sign reads: 'Love it, Hate It, You Said It. This is Creative – This is Redcar and Cleveland.' Redcar's previous outpost of culture and knowledge, until very recently, was an early 1970s library by architects Ahrends Burton Koralek, known both for some well-respected and well-kept University buildings in Oxford and Cambridge and for designing an unbuilt extension to the National Gallery which led Charles Windsor to first introduce 'monstrous carbuncle' to the architectural vocabulary. Redcar Library was 'contextual' in a certain sense, in that it recognized that Redcar was dominated by British

Steel. It was made of *local materials*, as Charlie always recommends, in this case high-tech steel. As with Billingham Forum, English Heritage listed it, a move that was immediately rejected by the relevant secretary of state. The council's appeal against the listing decision stressed just how inappropriate it was to design something so industrial. It looked like the factory. Generously, it could be argued that this made the library alienating for the workers supposed to use it; less generously, it seems it got in the way of the total elimination of industry from the area, as if they'd all read Huxley and decided instead to follow the savage into his reservation.

Except that they don't really want to reject the industrial revolution; they want an industrial society where industry hides itself, where we have old England but with humongous cars. Walk out of the centre of Redcar and you find yourself in exactly the kind of landscape that developers would like to build, were there no planners, no local governments, no aesthetics and no democracy in the way. A series of looping cul-de-sacs enclosing tiny detached houses and a big BUPA clinic. The road signs here give the names of twelve roads at once, because each close contains about four houses. This is the environment we all apparently



want. Each of the houses is pinched and minuscule because the space has to accommodate a driveway, a garden and detachment from its neighbours. In one of these cul-de-sacs is a Sound Mirror, a stark concrete structure designed as an early warning system in the First World War. It's exactly the same size as the bungalow next door, and feels part of the streetline – an irruption of the industrial past into the builders' zone of dead time.



Chapter Three

Preston: ‘On Earth There Is Nothing Great but Man’

A City in Fact

Ever since it was decided that the granting of City status no longer necessitated the building of a Cathedral – or the refuncting of a suitably large-scale church into one – the bestowal of such titles has become increasingly capricious. Middlesbrough, as we have seen, is not a City; neither are the populous cyber-subtopias of Basingstoke, Reading and Milton Keynes. Wells and Winchester are Cities, although you can walk from one end to the other in a fraction of the time it takes to cross Middlesbrough. So are the London Boroughs of Southwark, Westminster, and maybe, one day, Croydon. Until recently Preston was not a City, but in 2002 it won a national sweepstake, becoming in the process the newest City in the UK. This might sound puzzling, given Preston’s thousand-year-old existence. According to the 1920s Home Office directives that made non-ecclesiastical Cities possible, the ‘grant of the title is only recommended in the case of towns of the first rank in population, size and importance, and having a distinctive character and identity of their own’. Preston, though smaller than many of the above, is certainly fairly large in size and population. The other aspects, as so often with the English city, are harder to pinpoint.

One of the promises of the erstwhile Urban Renaissance was that it could not only restore dignity and urbanity to cities whose magnitude and magnificence should not seriously be in dispute, and would not be, were it not for the dual forces of snobbery and

deindustrialization – London, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Glasgow – but also that it could strengthen the urban qualities of smaller cities that might otherwise be straggling, vague, indistinct. A great deal of Britain is made up of these towns and cities, the Wakefields and Peterboroughs up and down the UK that somehow never made the leap into real civic pride and confidence. Preston sits between these two poles, in that it made major attempts at municipal munificence in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. The decade in which it became a City saw no such effort. Twentieth-century Preston also produced major civic architects in the form of the multidisciplinary firm Building Design Partnership, the largest architectural firm in the country. BDP's story, from its co-operative roots to its current position as designers of 'malls without walls', is remarkably analogous to that of the UK over the same period.

Preston might have ancient roots, but it's essentially a town of the industrial revolution; in fact, one of *the* towns of the industrial revolution, the home of Richard Arkwright, the factory-owner who had perhaps more of a hand than anyone else in the creation of industrial capitalism as we know it. The alarming environment of its textile mills and slums (not to mention its frighteningly revolutionary workers) spurred Charles Dickens to write *Hard Times*, whose utilitarian villain Gradgrind, famously unable to see anything other than monetary value, clearly still has some presence here. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Preston was also a pioneer in post-war roadbuilding, with the first stretch of motorway encircling it, and an inner ring road further inside. It scored a last rather than a first in 1969, when it became the nucleus of Central Lancashire New Town, the final New Town to be designated – before the unofficial New Town of Poundbury, at least. And Preston was pioneering in its radicalism too, one of the crucibles of the labour movement: there are still some independent left-wing councillors in the inner-city area of Deepdale. The New Town's main influence on the contemporary city can be found in the naming of the local ex-poly, now Central Lancashire University. Its new buildings, with their tiny windows trimmed by grey trespa and efflorescence-riven red brick, are unbelievably dispiriting. The knowledge that the expansion of the ex-polys will be brutally

stopped by the coalition's attack on the universities makes it even worse: that their brief moment of funding and state patronage should have resulted in inexcusable banality is especially sad in a public institution.

Elegant Interiors, Miserly Façades

The main vista that greets you outside Preston railway station is not delightful – Fishergate, with its shopping mall and drab architecture of various eras. This is the kind of high street that only England seems to be able to conjure up: miserably scaled, shabby, pinched. Yet here, presaging the urban pattern of the rest of the city, there is a gem hidden in amongst the misery, in the form of what is surely the city's major piece of inter-war design. This is Brucciani, a 1930s Lancastrian-Italian caff. Accusations of mere nostalgia are misplaced: when the place is finally replaced with a Caffè Nero, Brucciani could easily be shipped to the V&A, lock, stock and barrel. The curved glass at the entrance, which inside reveals delicate deco staining, with blue flowers twisting round the date '1932'; the Thonet chairs; the signs promising 'Grand Café Ice Cream Parlour' and 'Freshly Made Ices Cigarettes'. Inside, time has not quite stopped, and a few people, evidently regulars, are enjoying its quietness and elegance; but it does have the irksome caff habit of closing exceptionally early. Nonetheless, more than aesthetic solace can be found in here.

Much can be learnt about a city's self-perception from the monuments it erects to itself, and here Preston is prouder, stronger and more rooted than the awful new University buildings might indicate. Just outside the Corn Exchange, a well-proportioned red-brick classical building, is a series of figures, sculpted by Gordon Young in the late 1980s, commemorating Preston's General Strike and the riots that ensued in 1842. All of them are very squat, in the plump, miniature manner that in Manga is called 'super-deformed', with exaggerated, cartoonish features. Four are schematized into a robotic mass-production line, aiming their guns at the others, who are cowering or howling to slightly comic effect – one has their hands guarding their crotch, in the manner of defenders anticipating the hit of a direct free kick in

football. And behind them, at The Assembly – the pub that the Corn Exchange now is – a sign urges ‘CATCH ALL THE LIVE ACTION HERE’. It fits this version of civil unrest quite nicely. So here is an oddly experimental, politically militant piece of public art that doesn’t mind looking slightly ridiculous, erected as part of the collective memory of the working class. It might not do that often, but it could. Around it is the dispiriting red-brick pseudomodernism that makes up new development in Preston, ‘in keeping’ via its materials with the likes of the Corn Exchange, but with few more virtues than that.

A walk around the city centre reveals, initially, very little else worth looking at. If you want to see some of the more viciously unthought-out inner-urban sights in the UK, you can trace the ring road through horrible roadside retail buildings, under a motorway bridge to the 1980s Nicholas Ridley-ville of the small former docks; but, keeping to the space inside the road, you can quickly find yourself in something as fabulous as the Miller Arcade (tellingly, like Brucciani, an interior). This is a flamboyant High Victorian shopping arcade of the sort found in the West Riding of Yorkshire or Manchester. The delicate iron-and-glass roof and lamp fittings, the old shop signs, lush terracotta moulding, terrazzo floors, benches for the flâneurs and that sense of slight raffishness you can still detect in the bosses’ wives’ utopias of central Leeds: all are here, although unlike in Leeds, the twenty-first-century luxury shops certainly aren’t. The Miller Arcade initially included a bath-house, aspiring to be a civic amenity as well as a commercial space. Just outside are what look like entrances to public toilets, with the way down concreted in, just in case anyone gets the idea that the notion of ‘public conveniences’ is acceptable in this day and age. We sufferers from Crohn’s disease just have to ignore the ‘For customers’ use only’ signs in McDonald’s and Wetherspoons.

Nearby is something else worth looking at, for different reasons – the seldom-written-about but ubiquitous architecture of working-class nightclubbing. This is the premises of Lava, which on the day we visit is to host Basshunter. These structures are always adaptive, carved out of old warehouses and retail buildings; somewhere between the permanence of architecture-as-such

and the impromptu, dance-before-the-police-come nature of the warehouse party. They don't last long, and don't seem much missed when they are gone; but expect books by ex-raver design historians in 2040, if we get that far, collecting images of the former containers of happy hardcore, bassline and funky. Lava is kind of sort of High-Tech on the cheap, with big supergraphics announcing the club's name; the framed glass lozenge at the front is probably intended to evoke a lava lamp, what with the bubbles going up it. The pitched roof at the top indicates how cheap and ad hoc it all is, with the presence just behind of the mean Victorian shack it probably once was. And that, more or less, is about that for Preston's retail centre. Fans of Martin Parr's *Boring Postcards* going in search of St George's Shopping Centre, depicted therein with modernist abstract sculpture curving around concrete arcades, would be advised to avoid its current incarnation, a crushingly grim red-brick and green-glass remodelling.

Our St Petersburg

If that were all there is to Preston City Centre, then at least in architectural terms there'd be little to justify its newly civic status. There is the Church of St Walburge, with its incredibly thin, sharp spire, which would have made a fine Cathedral were this still one of the criteria. St Walburge is surrounded by dross (and, at the time of writing, threatened with closure). Yet there are, mercifully, three complexes which lift Preston up and out of this morass into something more powerful and proud, something worthy of the place's history of struggle. The first of the three is around the Harris Museum and Art Gallery. This ensemble is one of the greatest of sombre Northern civic centres, made up of various baroque administrative buildings, a stark Giles Gilbert Scott war memorial, a wide, imposing public square, and 'the Harris' itself – a piece of late Greek revival, designed by James Hibbert in 1882–93. The Harris Museum's classicism isn't bump-tious like Edwardian baroque, but harder, more serious. Its portico has the severity of the British Museum; just behind it is an almost funereal tower. The Harris feels strange for its time and place, with its almost Schinkel-like clarity and power. There

is nothing extraneous, no hint of Victorian folderol, as befits this (literal) temple of working-class self-education. The class pride at the heart of the project is clear in the improving quotations emblazoned across it, confident as the building is and progressive as it isn't: 'On Earth there is nothing great but Man – In Man there is nothing great but Mind'. It's a magnificent asset for any city. Here, where much of the townscape is shabby and stunted, it stands out as a beacon of what was once thought possible.

Inside, things are a little more complicated. The Art Gallery is a model of its kind; nothing 'major', nothing that would attract a visitor from another town, but just enough, if you grew up here, to send your mind into an unexpected state. There is a Jacob Epstein bust of utterly focused conviction and single-mindedness. There is another, more 'educational' exhibition on Preston's history, *Industrial Revolutionaries*, which is best described as 'problematic'. It's not really the content, which is genuinely informative although somewhat random – a plaque depicting industrial baron Richard Arkwright flanked by angels; a highly detailed model of a huge late-nineteenth-century factory complex; the weirdly smug banners of Temperance campaigners (the glow of the bearded notables here is quite indecent); contemporary sketches of the inhumane housing of the early mill-workers; the whipping horse onto which recalcitrant proletarians were tied and whipped; and handouts of the ballads written to accompany strikes. The problem is the apparent assumption that only children will be reading. Individual figures are profiled. Gas-light pioneer 'Father Joseph Dunn is a parish priest. He is loved by the people of Preston and they call him "Daddy" Dunn.' Temperance ideologist Joseph Livesey 'is a self-educated, self-made man and the people of Preston love him'. We do not learn whether or not the people of Preston love Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but we do learn that they watch insurgent developments in Preston avidly, considering it 'our St Petersburg' (they clearly weren't talking about the architecture). This procession of edutainment makes it abundantly clear that nineteenth-century Preston was not a good place to be a worker; however, while few would argue with this, it poses no questions about the present. Tulketh Mill, one of Preston's biggest, is now a combined retail park and call

centre, housing Tesco and Carphone Warehouse among others. Progress, as Gradgrind would surely have noted.

Walk out of the Harris, down its monumental steps and round the corner, and you find the second of Preston's *grands ensembles*. It consists of two Markets side-by-side, both of them simple but effective – one Victorian, a great big shed with good second-hand books underneath, the other 1960s, an uninteresting office block disguising a Coronation Street-Constructivist delight, with spacious, dynamic internal planning. As so often with these places, it's the remnants that are attractive, like the 'IMPORTANT NOTICE' which warns 'No auctions, pitchers, medicine workers, jewellery sellers or character readers'. The adjacent Goth stall 'Styx' would surely not approve of this authoritarianism. The next part is reachable from the street, although best approached by walkway. The Guildhall was built in 1972 to the designs of RMJM, major post-war civic architects here displaying the obvious influence of James Stirling's 'red period' – that is, an Anglicized version of modernism that borrows from the industrial aesthetics of the nineteenth century, all Accrington brick and cantilevers. Inside, this Northern modernism is already halfway to postmodernism, backwards-looking to the Miller Arcade in its glass roof, amid simplified, strangely pop clocks and escalators. There's also a hoarding here for something called the Tithebarn development. Renders show a nondescript outdoor shopping centre, a 'mall without walls' like a blander Liverpool One, with the usual attenuated peopleoids wandering around it. What is saddest is the quotes, presumably taken from a consultation, one of those occasions where locals are importuned for their opinions. The result is truly desperate. 'It's a nice place'. 'A bit of development is always good.'

Travel by walkway from the Guildhall and you find yourself in one of those typical 1960s attempts to redevelop a town through the conversion of its circulation into walkways, underpasses and towers, with people separated from cars. It contains a couple of decent towers by Building Design Partnership under the direction of the Brutalist Keith Ingham. Both create a distinctive, vigorous skyline, with wide outstretched wings, strong silhouettes that can be seen from a distance; up close there is vigorously modelled

concrete that hasn't needed painting or hiding. They are slightly dour, however, something which could certainly not be said about the building beneath – Preston Bus Station. For the last decade or so it has been threatened with demolition, for the purposes of that 'mall without walls' found on the information panel near the Guildhall. The usual aesthetes – campaigning group the Twentieth Century Society, with the support of English Heritage – tried to get it listed, only for the secretary of state with responsibility for 'culture' to refuse.

The aesthetes, are, as ever, right on an aesthetic level. Along with the Harris, the Bus Station is Preston's only building of national, even Continental confidence, originality and significance, and hence maybe part of the city's 'distinctive character and identity'. There are obvious problems with its circulation, its underpasses and entrances, but nothing which couldn't be solved by a decent restoration architect. And it's not, this time, just the aesthetes who are trying to preserve it. Unlike the average concrete bus station, it is held in undisputed public esteem. I later found that it had won a local newspaper poll for best building in Preston, and was not at all surprised. Its glorious sweep is so simple, so confident, so right, that only a churlish anti-modernist could not be seduced by it. The design is straightforward: four concrete layers modelled with a series of curved waves, which





across the station's length create op-art distortions, animating the station's movement, while looking serene, unhurried and uncluttered. It's the very model of a civic building – taking something everyday and ennobling it. Inside, matters are a little different: the clarity and order of the original signage battles with recent tat, a good scrub is overdue, and the clocks have stopped. The architects for the Bus Station's proposed replacement, the Tithebarn Centre, turn out, interestingly enough, to be Building Design Partnership. We will return to this imminently.

A Park as Victorian Novel

First, the third genuinely great thing about Preston. It is best reached via a rather tangential route. Cut through a snicket from the town centre, revealing a passageway straight out of one of Bill Brandt's 1930s photographs of northern industrial landscapes, a poisoned picturesque; a cobbled alleyway between broken-off ends of buildings with monstrous pipework crawling over them. The narrowness gives out onto something wide and expansive, though equally harsh: a surface car park surrounded by the torn-off stumps of Victorian streets, tiny little houses, often boarded up, and a multistorey car park, no beauty, but clearly less destructive

to Preston's precarious, constantly faltering semblance of coherent urbanism than the surface variety. A CCTV camera high up, a sign asking 'Why do you not drink your Vodka with attitude!', the windowless backs of disused workshops, a lethally spiked fence, a gaunt Gothic church, and, in the distance, Sandown Court Towers, two tower blocks that are rather smart in their gruff way. These, I note in Pevsner, are another 1960s product of the locals at Building Design Partnership. They are evidently system-built, repetitive and rectilinear. What makes them interesting is an unusually well-kept finish, as well as a faceted geometrical experiment in their proportions. The wings to maximize light are twisted like a Rubik's Cube in the upper storeys, creating an alternation of solid and void. Pevsner himself moves on from them quickly to a council housing scheme by James Stirling and James Gowan, that was famous at the time of writing (1969). The great man notes of the architects that 'it is curious that some people should have moved on recently to a nostalgia for the grimmer aspects of Victorian architecture'. The scheme is no longer here, so I had to consult old architectural books to find out what it looked like.

The grimmer aspects of Victorian architecture are of course still very much in evidence in Preston. Looking at photographs of Stirling and Gowan's housing scheme – low-rise and vivid red – it's clear that Pevsner was referring to its deliberate evocation of the gaunt, angular proportions found in cotton mills and workers' housing, which could be considered either the *recherché* pleasure of two London-based architects (one of them Scouse, but still), or a fittingly robust, contextual and non-patronizing response to the local cityscape. It's hard to tell from old photographs.

Now, there is much new housing on the site of Stirling and Gowan's demolished estate, and it is equally grim, and equally Victorian in feel. In part it's interchangeable with the nineteenth-century remnants nearby, distinguishable only by the relative clumsiness of the brickwork (and how shameful it is that the nineteenth-century remnants now seem well-made by comparison). The parts that try to be 'modern', with their timber cladding, are even worse – horribly proportioned, ungainly – but what is so striking is that the effect of Victorian sombreness is no longer actually willed. Stirling and Gowan may have deliberately tried

to evoke a feeling, a mood, a kind of collectivity, however much the end result might have become leaky and unloved. These, however, do not will anything. They are made seemingly without thinking, like spiders' webs, except without the instinctual flair for pattern. 'New Progress Housing Association' are the culprits. Maybe they're nice inside.

Turn off at the end of this street, and even this partial, messy urbanism starts to give way. A fragment of terrace one moment; the next, two paired neo-Tudor bungalows, of Beatrix Potter proportions. Walk down a winding staircase next to them, lined with overgrown vegetation, past a small playground, and suddenly you're somewhere completely magical. This is Avenham Park, and it's no flat piece of 'public realm', no concession to gain planning approval. It's an undulating, complicated, vivid landscape, and one where you can essentially see the city end right in front of you, just a short walk from the centre. It's the Victorian park as Victorian novel, a whole self-contained world in which you could spend weeks immersing yourself. The novelist in question was the landscape architect Edward Milner. Happily the park currently contains Preston's one decent twenty-first-century building, set on a curving hillock, a jagged little café by McChesney Architects, the busy roofline for once having a topographical point to it. The Victorians were pioneers both of municipal socialism and today's computer-assisted Manchester Liberalism, and here you can enjoy a space conceived as a proto-Keynesian means of creating jobs – during a recession, of all things. Of course there are dozens of these parks, and often they are timid affairs, bye-law pieces of amenity. What makes this one so glorious is a combination of topography and design. To get there from the city centre you plunge down a steep hill, gaining a panoramic view of the river Ribble and of what looks, deceptively, like countryside in front. In fact, the heavily industrialized Central Lancashire New Town sub-components of Chorley and Leyland start after this, but the illusion remains complete, without a chimney or tower block to betray the sleight of hand. What looks like a preserved old bridge is illusion too: a 1960s copy in concrete of an earlier, obsolete, wooden model.

Indisputably authentic is the line of trees that surmounts

Avenham Park's main pathway: elderly and wilting, the ideal place for the more aesthetically sensitive Goth to go on a date (they should advertise it at Styx). It's a mild tragedy to find that the trees will soon be cut down, lest in their process of dying they end up killing someone. Avenham Park's corners and nooks include a Japanese garden, a ruined belvedere, the obligatory whiskery statue of a local Victorian notable, and, under a railway bridge, another park entirely – Miller Park, contiguous with Avenham and of equal quality. When you find your way out, there's more in this lush, urbane manner: East Cliff and West Cliff, planned around a slightly wonky but by Preston standards impressive Regency square, with the red-brick houses showing a classical rectitude and proportion. The lamps are Victorian, indicating that we are in a Conservation Area. Here is the home of Keith Scott, former chairman of Building Design Partnership, and Milena Grenfell-Baines, the widow of the firm's founder, George Grenfell-Baines. I was supposed to be here to interview them.

A Mania of Architecture

I had received an unexpected assignment from Building Design Partnership itself – to contribute an essay to their 60th anniversary auto-hagiography. Unexpected because I had been critical in print of their recent works, especially WestQuay, the hulking shopping mall they had designed in my home town of Southampton, a sprawling retail hangar from whose effects the city will suffer for decades. I had, however, said very complimentary things about their 1960s–70s buildings, especially in the North – the breathtaking mill-town futurism of their Halifax Headquarters, the clipped modernity of Bradford University. So my assignment was to write about the early years, when they were idealists working for universities, mutuals, 'benevolent' corporations and local councils. To this end I got a meeting with their current chairman, Tony McGuirk, at the head office in (inevitably) Clerkenwell, London. McGuirk, a personable silver-haired northerner who gained his early architectural experience working on Ralph Erskine's still unsurpassed Byker council estate in Newcastle, asserted that after a bad 1980s designing malls, BDP were back

on a social-democratic track, their offices around the country producing dozens of humanist-modernist hospitals, schools and housing. I asked about WestQuay, finished in 2001. He looked sheepish. 'Ah. We took that one over from Chapman Taylor ...'

I was granted a list of buildings which I could research and gain access to for my text – remarkable buildings in Bradford, Halifax and Liverpool (an early conversion of Jesse Hartley's Albert Dock). They would (as we've seen) send me to ICI Wilton in Middlesbrough; and in Preston, to the Bus Station. I was also set up to meet with their oldest surviving chairman, Keith Scott, at his house just off Miller Park. Quiet and sheltered behind a large garden, it was hard to imagine we were still in the city centre; Scott, by now a very old man, talked in so hushed a tone that it was as hard for me to hear him as vice versa. The first thing I noticed was a wall onto which photographs of nearly all the BDP buildings that Scott had a hand in were pinned. I asked about many of them, which he identified for me as if he was surprised by my interest. In black and white were the Sandown Court Towers, and a couple of very striking, expressionist schools, one in Preston and one in Scarborough – ultra-modern but not remotely dated, showing a consummate architectural assurance and confidence. In colour were shopping malls in Kingston and Ipswich, with huge, capacious glass roofs and whacking great central escalators, alongside neo-Victorian street façades. An image of Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral caught my eye. Scott's contribution was a series of '80s neo-Georgian houses spilling down the adjacent hill, thin and Disney-like. What happened here?

Sticking to my brief, I asked him about the post-war period. He didn't mince words. 'It was a disastrous period. A mania of architecture.' I asked him to elaborate. 'Immediately after the war, when we came to develop our traumatized cities, we found the building stock was both very poor and severely damaged. So we had to produce a building stock quite quickly, with cheap methods of building that produced a result, and we produced a lot of shoddy architecture.' Then I asked about the Sandown Court towers, and at first he was similarly dismissive. 'They were slab blocks built incredibly quickly, and never properly managed.' After years of neglect, though, in the last decade they became

more prestigious, with the council selling off both blocks to a private developer. ‘The interesting thing is that they work now they’ve been sold to private buyers. My son and I have bought one of the penthouses at the top.’ I ask about Preston Bus Station, and he points out that he had been lobbying and preparing plans for its replacement with a shopping mall on the site for some time: ‘There ought to be an anchor store. It’ll be John Lewis.’

As to style, he still praises the Bus Station’s ‘very elegant form’, but insists it was and is in the wrong place, and that we shouldn’t be sentimental about a bus station that ‘was only ever half-used’. Yet in the new plans BDP have drawn up for the Tithebarn Mall, the bus station won’t be replaced – the public amenity will simply disappear. I couldn’t make sense of Scott’s position: the change in the buildings he’d produced, his combined depreciation of and affection for them. When I asked if he had a particular stylistic change of heart during the 1970s and ’80s, he denied it. ‘I don’t think anything to do with style entered my head’, whether designing modernist towers or neo-Victorian malls. At most, he’ll claim that his approach was almost automatic. ‘We would see what the ethos of the place was, and represent that in the architecture. Sometimes that comes out quite contemporary. I’d let the architecture tell me what it wanted to do.’ He even claims to support Prince Charles’s 1980s endeavours to crush modernist architecture, because ‘ever since then there’s been a prescription in design terms that you’ll try and understand the ethos of the place.’ He shows me a book he wrote around then, called *Shopping Centre Design*. In its illustrated praise of stock-brick and fibreglass revivalism and its dismissal of modernism, it resembles the Prince’s contemporary *A Vision of Britain*.

The answer to this puzzle might lie in BDP’s collective ethos. Rather than following a house style, each group of architects would work as appropriate to the brief, the time and the place. Work was presented through collective design seminars. Here, ‘everyone said what they wanted – and I was keen on this, because you were still completely free to discount all that advice – although you’re a fool if you do’. Of those glorious expressionist schools, Scott says that the firm’s founder, George Grenfell-Baines, was vociferous in opposition from the start. ‘He

put enormous pressure on me, but never instructed me to change the design.’ The very different architects at the firm never had to subsume their identities, which is obviously why the same firm managed to create three buildings as different, and as individually remarkable, as the Halifax HQ, ICI Wilton or Preston Bus Station. It’s also evidently why BDP so consummately embraced the aesthetics (and functions – all those malls) of Thatcherism, when it came. Lacking a strong identity as a counter to then-current trends and still needing to provide employment for around a thousand people, they produced work that completely reflected the era’s profiteering, shallow ethos. They did so with such convert’s zeal that Scott considers the malls of the 1980s his most important achievement.

What’s an Architect?

After a little while John Gravell, the project architect at the Bus Station, arrives. He’s younger and considerably easier to talk to, and insists too on the paradoxical individuality that the collective firm – who resolutely practised profit-sharing, equality between disciplines and co-operation, only becoming a normal limited company in 1997 – enabled. ‘The freedom that the staff had was unique. There was a great deal of freedom for the individual – which changed when we organized ourselves in a different way’. He asks about the list of ‘key projects’ I was given at BDP HQ, and wonders why the shopping centres have been missed out. He then drives me to the Bus Station and shows me which fittings BDP designed (the elegant, expensive ones, in wood and polished metal) and those the council added decades later (the tacky seats and signs that make the place look far cheaper than it is). Gravell seems breezily unmoved by the dereliction that has overtaken the building whose design he took to completion – he’s obviously seen it all so frequently that it doesn’t bother him any more. I ask him about the head architect on the project, Keith Ingham, who broke with BDP protocol by insisting on being personally credited. ‘It was a very fine design indeed, but Keith was a bit of a dilettante, not so interested in the nuts and bolts.’ And what of its function? ‘We said to the Corporation several times that the bus

station was in the wrong place', too far from the railway station. After reluctantly taking it on, BDP tried to balance their intention to create 'something like an airport' with the guidelines they'd been given by the council. 'The brief insisted on subways, and people would clamber over the fences and cross the bus aprons. There were supposed to be shops in the walkways and subways, but within weeks the carpets were burnt, the seats were stolen and the glass was smashed. The vitrines were taken out after two years and never replaced.' As we look out over Preston from the sweeping ribs of the car park, he says 'the police used to ring us up after each suicide here, asking for drawings'.

We drive back to West Cliff to meet Milena Grenfell-Baines, widow of BDP founder George. There's an accepted story about post-war modernism, and why it apparently succeeded with the politicians and failed with the public, and it centres on the class divide between the architects and those for whom they were professedly designing a new world. Think of all those 1930s documentaries in which stiff men in tweed suits expatiate in RP on the intolerable conditions in the slums, on the need for hygiene, light, air and openness; think, too, of the widespread canard that modernist architects always live in Georgian houses. In this schema, Modernism is *de haut en bas*, a let-them-eat-cake solution to a housing crisis where former inner-city dwellers are rehoused in obsessively sanitary but soulless new towns and high-rises, by people that would never have lived either in the old back-to-backs nor in the new towers and who preferred that others should suffer the consequences of their experiments. What is so striking about George Grenfell-Baines, whose self-named firm would become Building Design Partnership in 1961, is that he fitted none of these stereotypes. Well, apart from the Georgian house.

Milena, an ebullient, witty, erudite woman, arrived in Preston after being evacuated from Czechoslovakia just before its occupation by Nazi Germany. She spreads out before me a collection of photographs and cuttings, but my eye is drawn more by the fittings in the house. On the outside, it's a handsome and restrained 1830s building, but inside most of the original Georgiana has been stripped out, to be replaced with enough mid-century modern furnishings to give a conservationist a coronary, with elegant but

not remotely traditionalist clocks and dressers in a beautifully polished and patterned wood.

When I start asking questions, Milena remembers her husband as a ‘great believer in modernism’, not out of a desire to impose something alien upon the industrial proletariat, but because he grew into modernism. George Baines (he later added the ‘Grenfell’, his mother’s maiden name, because there was another architect with the same name) was the son of Methodist parents, living in the centre of Preston; his father was a railwayman. Milena recalls that, despite passing the exams, George never made it to grammar school, because ‘his parents couldn’t afford the uniform ... he had to go to work when he was fourteen, and studied at night. He got a job working as a draughtsman for a surveyor, and on being told by someone impressed with his drawings that he should become an architect, he replied “What’s an architect?”’ George would later be the first student to get a scholarship from Preston Council, to study at Manchester University, followed by practice with Bolton firm Bradshaw, Gass and Hope. His early work in the local area was eclectic. I am suitably boggled by Milena’s photographs of an Aalto-esque interior for Preston’s Stanley Hotel, but I also recognize in one photo that mock-Tudor bungalow near the entrance to Avenham Park.

After going into private practice, Grenfell-Baines’s break came with the 1951 Festival of Britain. Being from the Industrial North, they were given the ‘Power and Production’ pavilion to do. A decade later, after designing new towns at Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee, the firm contained ‘so many talented designers’ that Baines thought it arrogant to keep his name at the head, and organized it instead into an interdisciplinary collective, including engineers, interior designers and other professions among the registered architects. In a field where many firms keep the names of their founders long after they’ve died, this was and is a remarkable gesture. Yet that interdisciplinarity, rather than the collectivity, was probably the secret of their success: a bundle of professions rather than mere architects, making life easy for contractors and clients. Note that ‘architecture’ did not feature as part of the new firm’s name.

Unusually, Milena doesn’t shrink from the ‘s’ word: ‘He was

certainly a socialist.’ Although ‘he might have changed his mind late on when he saw how things were going’, she insists that ‘BDP’s were socialist principles’. The socialist-modernist experiments of the 1920s and of the Weimar Republic in particular formed the context to this, as in so much else in the 1960s. Milena says that ‘his ideal was the Bauhaus – the different professions under one roof’, or – as Baines would more excitedly have put it – ‘technology and art linking together in fruitful dialectic relationships’. He would receive the benediction of Bauhaus director Walter Gropius himself, who told him: ‘You have done what I would like to have done in Dessau.’

By the 1990s, Baines was still living in Preston, and BDP’s transformation into a regular business concern was made without his involvement. Paradoxically, the loss of collectivity also meant a decline in individuality, something that can be easily detected in the tamed modernism of BDP’s contemporary buildings. ‘George never wanted BDP to become a limited company,’ Milena says. ‘They’re Directors now, not Partners. And there’s more control on designs now in BDP than there ever was then.’ I wonder why, after designing practically the entire Preston skyline between 1964 and 1969, BDP had no subsequent commissions there. She claims – though suggests I may not want to print the allegation – that this was because BDP campaigned for the retention of several historic buildings in the centre, which did not endear them to the municipal architect. That is, of course, all set to change with the Tithebarn development. Or at least it was when I was there.

Architecture, goes a well-worn joke, is the second oldest profession, without the standards of the first. BDP’s story seems to exemplify what happens when architects try not to be mere whores, or egoistic fine artists working in three dimensions. BDP is probably among the few practices ever really to take modernism and social democracy seriously, by extending it into their own lives as architects rather than just letting it dictate what they designed. The problem, of course, is what happens to even the most ethically run company when it finds itself in a deeply unethical society. There’s still something bizarre about the fact that dozens of quintessentially Thatcherite out-of-town shopping malls were designed by a professedly socialist collective. They

had to keep mouths fed, and given that the firm numbered over 1,000 people, they had no choice but to live with a system seemingly deeply hostile to what they believed in. In London, Tony McGuirk insists to me that the schools and mammoth PFI hospitals they design today are evidence that BDP's socialist spirit continues – yet the malls also continue, most obviously in their privately run, privately patrolled mall-without-walls on the Mersey, Liverpool One.

Not in Preston, though. In late 2011, Titebarn was effectively cancelled, as – surely predictably – there was no demand for a third shopping mall in a post-industrial city, particularly one hit by a recession which only had two distinct 'dips' in the South. The 'anchor', that other profit-sharing behemoth John Lewis, had pulled out. Those crushingly dull renders of pine and glass 'retail offers' I saw by the Guildhall will not be replacing the Bus Station any time soon. The same month the cancellation was announced, BDP's North-Western office announced heavy lay-offs.

Deep Down in Deepdale

There was just one more building I wanted to see in Preston before leaving. The route to it took me through Deepdale, Preston's residential working-class heart. This is an area which regularly votes left-of-Labour, so maybe it will yet be our St Petersburg, with the call-centre workers rising from Tulketh Mill. As I would soon find out, the area does retain a certain wakefulness. The shift from the town centre to Deepdale is marked by a particularly Dickensian prison, still in use. This is very probably the grim but compelling Victorian architecture Pevsner raised his eyebrow about, with dream-nightmare accidental details, such as a grand stone arch whose entrance is filled in with red brick. 'Challenging and changing attitudes to reduce crime in our communities' is the attached banner for an HM Prisons campaign called 'Revolution'. A long road leads to the football ground, and here you can see Preston's cityness crumble. The grand, stone-clad and porticoed Stephenson Terrace, now packed with solicitors' offices, faces the introverted anti-urbanism of a retail park, which in turn is situated near a little Victorian baroque bus depot, indicating that BDP

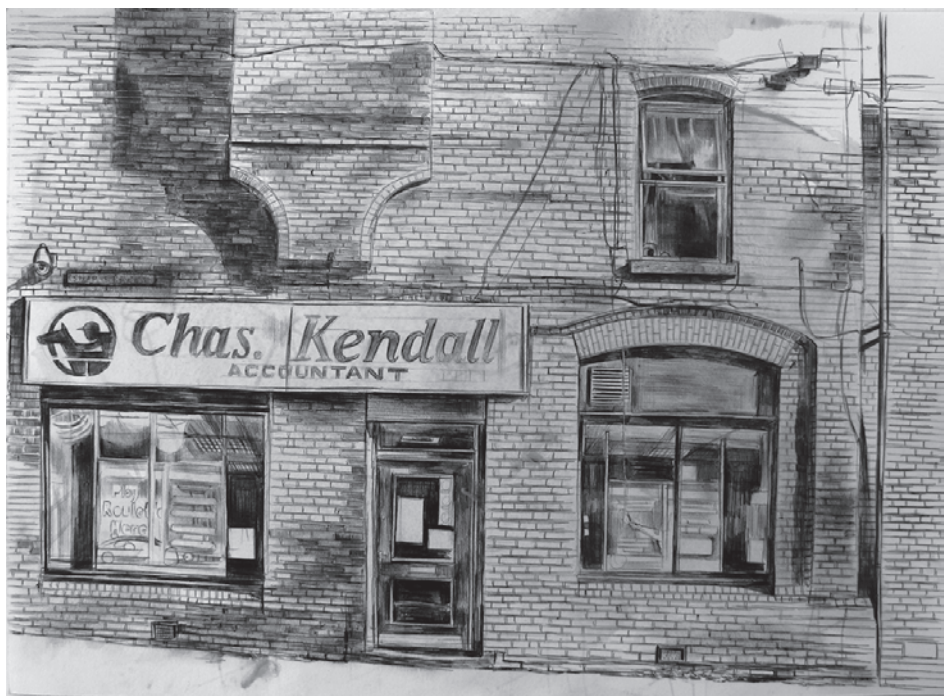
had some precedent to follow in ennobling public transport. The area, multiracial and dense, surely has enormous potential for a real urbanism – but any new development has largely ignored such potential. The Northernness here is of a raw, melancholic Shelagh Delaney sort: overcast, with blood-red brick, scarred by the Industrial Revolution and its subsequent Thermidor.

At one point, a bridge passes over a weird mass of undergrowth, too weed-ridden and untamed to be a park of any kind, but with what looks like a path running through it. It's hard to tell whether a canal or a Beeching-axed railway line once passed through here. Snapping away at the buildings, I notice a little juxtaposition where a recent pair of houses has tried to copy the Palladian doorways of its nineteenth-century precursors just over the road, with, I thought, an unfortunate clumsiness. I've taken similar photographs dozens of times, and the only people who ever get irate are security guards. Sometimes you get asked if you're from the council, and that's about it. Not this time, though. A headscarfed woman pulls over in her car, with her kids in the back, and points out in sharpest Lancastrian, clearly very annoyed: 'You've just taken a picture of my house!' I apologize, and explain what I'm doing here, aware that it sounds completely ridiculous. 'But it's illegal to take pictures of people's houses!' I try and explain that no, it isn't, and offer to delete the photo from my camera, but she still looks indignant. Eventually, giving up, I walk off, and she drives off. I never learned which of the two houses was hers.

Finally I arrive at the building I'm looking for. Adjacent to Preston North End FC's Deepdale Stadium is OMI Architects' National Football Museum, a pretty kitsch but enjoyably tasteless would-be avant-garde mishmash, resembling what Capita might produce if given a book on the Russian Constructivist Konstantin Melnikov – Preston's only shot at an architectural 'icon', in the decade it tried to get rid of the Bus Station, its most famous building. Recently, the Museum was closed and moved southwards to Manchester – more specifically, to Urbis, to replace that Mancunian museum's former focus on 'the city'. I peek in through the windows at the abandoned café and the partially demounted exhibits. There will be no replacement, and nobody



I speak to seems to think that anything else will be done with the building. Looking at this newest of cities, it's abundantly clear that we neither know nor care about what makes a city into an architecturally or socially coherent thing. Nor do we generally care to try and help somewhere that lies in between, somewhere that hasn't quite achieved a true city's sense of possibility, drama and distinctive presence, but that has potential in spades. Instead, anything it does create is hived off to the bigger city down the M6, to a place that doesn't need the favour.



Chapter Four

Barrow-in-Furness: Diving for Pearls

Up England's Longest Cul-de-Sac

It isn't unusual, in this line of work, to hear the question: 'But why on earth would you want to go *there*?!' I don't think I ever heard that so often as with Barrow-in-Furness, especially at Lancaster, when changing trains on the way. A dubious reputation seems to precede it. To get there, a two-carriage train loops along the north-west Lancashire coast. It's a lovely journey, but not one to be taken when needing to be punctual. So, why Barrow? Well, apart from the short answer – because people live there – for two main reasons, two things that make it most unlike any other comparable town in the UK. First of all, the urbanism. Not only is it a rare English planned town, but remarkably, for a place so small, much of its Victorian centre is made up of big-city architecture; specifically, the kind of speculative tenement flats found more often in Scotland or Germany and practically nowhere else in England. Second interesting thing: unlike practically any other northern industrial town these days, Barrow still makes stuff, and it makes stuff right in the centre of town, right in your face – especially extraordinary given what unpleasant stuff this is. And Barrow's sheer remoteness has a certain intrigue, with its 60,000 people squeezed into a peninsula and two tiny islands in a long protrusion (a 'cul-de-sac' or an 'armpit', depending who you ask) at the edge of Cumbria, although in both history and accent Barrow is indisputably part of Lancashire. It also has the dubious statistical honour of being 'the most working-class town

in Britain', due apparently to the amount of chip shops, working men's clubs, manual jobs and unshakeable Labour voting. What is evidently meant by the phrase is 'the town where the working class most resembles the working class as it was before the 1980s'.

That's apt, as Barrow is also one of the towns in Britain least architecturally affected by the twentieth century, and the twenty-first has made only the slightest inroads, once inoffensively and once atrociously. The prospect from the boxy station centres on a red-brick-and-glass swoopy-roofed office block and some predictable Blairboxes, both fairly uninteresting – but there is far worse in other, larger towns. That's about as far as the Urban Renaissance model reached in this most dense of industrial towns – although a dockside scheme, 'The Waterfront', promised to roll out the more depressing form of marina dromeage, only to be indefinitely shelved in 2010 with little more than some paths completed. There's a possible reason for this failure. While most dockside schemes have little more than some ornamental cranes and a grain silo or two for company, Barrow's one would have been in the shadow of the enormous shed where Trident Submarines are produced – the most impressive industrial monument of post-1960s Britain, though competition may not be fierce. Barrow-in-Furness has its own airport, despite its tiny population. You learn why when you realize that it is effectively a disavowed company town for BAE Systems, the para-state arms manufacturer formed out of various nationalized companies. BAE's presence in Barrow is physically, unavoidably massive – one of the largest buildings of any sort in the UK.

With all the Will in the World, Diving for Dear Life

This is BAE Systems' Devonshire Dock Hall, better known here as the Trident Shed, or alternately 'Maggie's Farm', due to her role in getting it built in the mid-1980s. This is perhaps the only major example of her politics leading to the opening rather than closing of a factory. The British arms industry somehow never faced the same neglect as steel, coal or even motor manufacturing, although it was certainly as adept at downsizing: what we have here is basically one giant shed employing a mere handful



of those who would once have worked on the site. We're in the territory described in Robert Wyatt's heartbreaking song 'Shipbuilding'. What would otherwise be a stone-dead industrial town is kept on life support by perpetual warfare; appropriately, the Falklands War shook it from its habitual Labour allegiances for two terms in the '80s. I quickly hear of a couple of people who 'got filled in for saying that people get killed in the results of the shipbuilding'. It's here that the submarines that carry the British 'nuclear deterrent' are built, and the place which would finally die if Trident were, as seems sensible, discontinued. For now, the production line runs on – a finished submarine rolled out of 'DDH' the week after we visited. Architecturally – if that's the word – the Devonshire Dock Hall is genuinely astonishing, a Death Star clad in corrugated metal, visible from as far away as Blackpool, the size of several tower blocks stacked end-to-end. Its black, white and yellow cladding is filthy with grime, and would already stick out in what is otherwise a red brick and red sandstone town, even if it wasn't so colossal. Adjacent is the relatively Lilliputian 1994 Dock Museum, bland on the outside but with a multi-level interior that rewards some exploration.

The only area in which the rhetoric of 'defending jobs' was ever made reality by the governments of the last twenty years

was in Defence, so while the preponderance of an actual working – if minimally staffed – industry shouldn't be that surprising, it comes as a shock nonetheless. Mostly, industry today is hidden in the exurbs, or obliterated, or, if possible, made into luxury flats. Here, we're so far away from where media might be looking or the middle classes might think of moving, that the suburbanization of industry never happened. The centre of Barrow industry is on Barrow Island, reached by a high level bridge from the centre. In old photographs, you can see it crowded with people; now, on a working day around 5.30, we barely see anyone. Residentially, Barrow Island is an extreme landscape. The first reference for its tall, symmetrical sandstone tenements might be Glasgow, but venture round the back of Michaelson Street or Schooner Street and the feeling is more Hanseatic than Scottish: the rubble stone and peaked roofs are Baltic in feel, with the icy weather generating steam off the sandstone. It's all oddly Urban Renaissance after all, at least in typology. On the ground floors are shops, as twenty-first-century town planners always insist, but instead of estate agents and Costa, it's Happy Shopper and Turf Accountants.

Drop someone blindfolded here and they'd never believe they were in a small town. These blocks are approximately as unforgiving as they are impressive. There is little but tarmac in between the tenements, so in terms of public space, playgrounds, or any alleviation of the general hardness, the shoddiest system-built estate of the 1960s is superior; but the power and urbanity here are still bracing. It might have been company housing for abominably treated workers, but it at least assumes its tenants are *adults*. Yet these buildings are fragments, bizarre relics of the High Victorian moment when observers could call this place 'the English Chicago' without smirking. On one side, the tall flats subside into two-up-two-downs and then end at the bay, disappearing into a mess of works, metal chimneys, boats and World War Two pillboxes. On the other side is a much more conscious piece of architecture, and a truly incongruous one: the impossibly strange concrete geometry of Seeley and Paget's inter-war St John's Church. This oddly abstract and minimal structure is a Norse-Arabic mirage, its white render giving off an unearthly glare amidst the sandstone.



At the entrance to Barrow Island is a handsome sandstone office block, the terminus of the immensely long sandstone shed built in the 1890s for Vickers, the engineering corporation responsible for much of Barrow's late-Victorian development from steel town into shipbuilding port. Vickers eventually became one of the components of BAE, and the sandstone bases of earlier factories form the ground floors to BAE Systems' immense metallic sheds. Just opposite the tenements, you're flanked by jagged-roofed yellow and grey factories, and cannot fail to notice a building that proudly tells you it produces 'Global Combat Systems Weapons'. This site contains a whole complex of arms factories, all of them announcing on the front door precisely what it is they make. Barrow's geographical isolation, up that Cumbrian 'cul-de-sac', makes perfect sense all of a sudden. Emerging from the other end of the BAE works, I'm amazed that nobody has tried to impound my camera, or has even looked askance at me. It's not as if nobody noticed: men in high-vis jackets stand by and look unconcerned. I've got in far more trouble photographing shopping centres. Nothing could better sum up Barrow Island's apparent ease with its function as a producer of instruments to kill and maim.

This is of course what Barrow always was, and the town has always profited from war – although at one time this was at least accompanied by an intent to build a town of some distinction

out of the whole sordid business. Railway entrepreneur James Ramsden, Barrow's de facto founder, produced a town plan in the 1860s centred around grand squares, linking a slightly irregular grid plan. Ramsden's statue stands in the middle of one of these squares – now an entropic roundabout, albeit one flanked by civic buildings unusually competent and strong for a town so small; the compact, Vanbrugh-esque public library is especially powerful. Ramsden also sponsored a Town Hall competition whose result, designed by Belfast architect William Henry Lynn, is first-rate, its turrets and towers in a red sandstone Northern Gothic that is perfect for the place's atmosphere, delicate light and topography. With the total absence of tall tower blocks or office blocks – the nearest equivalent, by one of the squares/roundabouts, is a 1960s block of a mere four storeys – the Town Hall tower is still by far the town's most prominent architectural structure, save of course for 'DDH'. These two – the council and BAE – should by rights be this visually prominent, as they're the only two real employers in town.

From English Chicago to Hollywood Park

On Walney Island, reached via the splendid, spindly early-twentieth-century Jubilee Bridge from the Trident Shed, is the paternalist suburb of Vickerstown, a Garden City by any other name, overlooking the water. Half-timbered Arts and Crafts houses, some not much bigger than back-to-backs, lead towards more standard, if eerily spacious '30s and '60s low-rise housing, separated by iced-over and empty green spaces. From these slopes you have a magnificent prospect of the Town Hall and the Shed. Walney Island contrasts outrageously with Barrow Island's ultra-urbanity, a sharp retreat from the idea that this could ever be an 'English Chicago'. Here you can see in stone and pebble-dash that moment in English architecture where the dense, proud, city-like city was completely abandoned as an ideal in favour of Ebenezer Howard's dispersed, verdant, half-timbered, mock-organic non-city, upwind of the chimneys. The amenities and green space, both private and public, were obviously superior to those of the other Island, but it's notable just how small the

houses look – that the change didn't go that far. Finally there's a beach, the Irish Sea, with wind turbines visible in the distance, an epiphanic view of the Lake District very close by, and the Round House, a council-built flight of fancy now housing a Chinese restaurant. This last is something between a pillbox and a piece of chic mid-century modern. So that's the architecture the workers received from their benevolent rulers. At Barrow's northern edge, the head of Vickers got Lutyens to design his house, its neo-Elizabethan volumes a stark dry run for the more famous Castle Drogo on Dartmoor. Can the era of BAE Systems boast of a similar architectural legacy?

Well, Barrow might not be Chicago, but on the site of the Hindpool steelworks, around which the city originally arose, is 'Hollywood Park', one of the most dispiriting retail developments in the British Isles. The wipe-clean Pizza Huts and PC Worlds are not so much an affront to their red-brick context as blissfully unaware of it, while the vast car parks bite into what is otherwise a refreshingly compact town, the sort that in the Netherlands would have more bicycles than cars. Hollywood Park is the twenty-first century's main contribution to Barrow-in-Furness. Typically, in this Labour stronghold, it breaks every one of the planning rules set down by the outgoing government in its various white papers and recommendations, except for a single concession – it's in the city centre rather than out-of-town. BAE makes enormous profits in Barrow – the town's aforementioned airport basically exists for its use, given the relative complexity of getting here by train – but any investment in return is very hard to uncover. As an indicator of Barrow's likely future, in the centre of town a training agency advertisement declares to the young: 'EMA stops soon. Sign up now!'

The Victorian industrialists didn't want to live in the town centre, but their movement to the suburbs is now compounded to the point where the local bosses fly in and out. After a couple of days in Barrow, we don't know quite what to make of a place that can become very depressing very easily. With me is my partner, a Polish writer who had little experience of non-metropolitan Britain. At first she is aghast at what I have taken her to see: this bizarre, scarred little town, with its crumpled cars

by the roadside, its conspicuous lack of even charity shops, its lifelessness on a Saturday night, with none of the usual Northern night-on-the-town schmutter. Gradually she starts to appreciate Barrow's sheer strangeness, but is still quite glad to leave. When, on the train south to change again at Lancaster, we look through the unexpectedly utopian photographs we've taken, she says: 'These make it look too good, we'll end up being nostalgic about it. We should try and remember just how bad it actually was.' Yet for one thing, the impression that Barrow doesn't have much in the way of 'culture' is deceptive. A few months later the town plays host to the Detroit techno group Dopplereffekt, who make weightless, beatless, intricately-wrought electronic music inspired by particle physics and the Big Science of the Large Hadron Collider. Barrow, with its cold, open air and the presence at its heart of nuclear engineering, is evidently the perfect UK venue for them. It's worth pondering whether they were invited or whether they approached the town's venues themselves, longing for the proximity to the thermonuclear. But when I ask an old friend who grew up here about this, he recalls various unexpected avant-garde acts of the late '80s playing in the town. Just beneath the surface, things are evidently happening here; the freakish reminiscences of Hamburg in Barrow Island may not be all that misplaced.

There is nowhere in England quite like Barrow-in-Furness, and that surely counts for something. In a disconcertingly short space and time you can walk through some of the most unusual architectural terrain in the country, and find the unique persistence of city-centre industry. That said, the boarded-up shops, the derelict pubs, the empty streets, all tell their own story. It's probably more comfortable to be poor here in 2010 than in 1910 – but should that excuse the brain death in anodized aluminium that is Hollywood Park, or the complete failure to plough at least some of the money extracted from this town back into it? Even judged on the basest capitalist terms, Barrow's overlords have been awesomely negligent. Architecturally, Barrow today is nowhere. Yet once, this minuscule town was compared with megacities like Glasgow and Chicago, and that ambition can still be dimly detected. Here's one town that actually *wanted* to be urban.



Chapter Five

The Metropolitan County of the West Midlands: The Patchwork Explains, the Land Is Unchanged

Welcome to Anglia

If you keep one thing away from your mind, then there is about as much to admire and to not admire in Birmingham as in any other large city in the UK: (relative) multicultural ease, a diversity of urban landscapes, good art galleries and concert halls if that's what you're into, and some fine civic buildings. By those standards it's much like other Midlands cities: at least as interesting as Nottingham or Leicester, which means pretty interesting, but scarcely more. What makes Birmingham such a national embarrassment (save for the usual idiotic sneering about accent and concrete) is the fact that somehow it is Britain's Second City.

That it empirically deserves this status is beyond question. By municipality, its one-million-plus inhabitants place it comfortably above nearest competitors Glasgow, Leeds and Liverpool; as continuous metropolitan areas, however, Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool, Tyneside and Leeds-Bradford are larger. But if you then add Birmingham's (almost entirely contiguous) hinterland – the Black Country, plus numerous unincorporated suburban areas like Solihull, you have, in terms of population, easily one of the EU's largest cities, with 2.3 million inhabitants. In economic terms, despite being hit very hard by previous recessions, it had converted by the twenty-first century to 'financial services', property and retail, with greater apparent ease than most. So it is very much the UK's second most powerful area in economic terms. It is the Second City, and that's that.

As to why this is a problem, take anyone who is not from the UK, bring them to London, then to Birmingham, and then afterwards to Liverpool, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Manchester or Newcastle: the point will be made for you. If, as this book partly contends, the dominance of London and the South East is bad for the UK, a symptom of a radically unequal and deformed country, then there needs to be a major counterbalancing force. In Scotland and Wales this function is partially performed by devolution, but in England there is no such force. In the last-mentioned cities above you can feel a real metropolitanism in the architecture and urbanism that has simply no equivalent in Birmingham. They might both have been pivotal in the industrial revolution, but Manchester's civic buildings, mills and warehouses literally tower over those of Birmingham. Glasgow might have been a co-pioneer of 'gas and water socialism', but that's about all it shares with Birmingham. Liverpool's architecture of flashy commerce is richer and more grandly scaled. Newcastle's heavy industrial heritage is writ large in its centre, rather than hidden away in cottage-industry workshops. Each of these cities, notwithstanding recent decline, exhibits the overwhelming pride and scale of a metropolis. Birmingham doesn't, and it doesn't ever seem to have given much of a toss. It keeps itself to itself. It is fundamentally modest – and, as Jonathan Meades pointed out in his paean to the city, unlike its competitors Brum does not export disgruntled expats to London en masse. Yet it never quite manages to elevate this modesty into a virtue, so that numerous successive plans to beef it up since the 1950s managed to make it seem more provincial rather than less. The latest, with a telling ring of over-protestation, is called The Big City Plan.

What Birmingham boils down to is some sort of accidental quintessence of urban and suburban Englishness, encapsulated in its utter lack of typological regionality, originality or eccentricity. The Metropolitan West Midlands, and Birmingham in particular, is in terms of its built form so consummately English that authorities might as well take a leaf out of Albert Speer's book and rename it *Anglia*. Witness the way that its small yet labyrinthine, massively overdeveloped commercial centre, ringed with wasteland and empty luxury flats, is then surrounded by a seemingly

faceless suburban sprawl – Victorian, '30s, '60s – indistinguishable to the outsider but highly differentiated to the local eye. The car rules absolutely, with mid-century engineers' frankly manly interventions still dominating; by comparison, public transport is pathetic, especially the poky tram with the temerity to call itself a 'Metro'. Here, red brick and terracotta are more furiously red, council high-rises are duller, semis are bleaker, roads are more intrusive than anywhere else. Yet the sad fact is that it's hard to define anything about all this as being *specifically* Brummie or Black Country, in the way that certain architectures are instantly recognizable as Mancunian, Scouse or Glaswegian. What marks it out is its monstrous typicality; almost anything in the UK outside the West Midlands can be found in here somewhere. Given the place's size and complexity, what follows is a highly tentative attempt to work out what might actually make it distinctive.

Built for Men

The name to conjure with in the centre of Birmingham is that of its former city engineer, Herbert Manzoni, possibly the most powerful of the post-war municipal demiurges. Unlike, say, Sheffield's J. L. Womersley, Manzoni wasn't particularly concerned about aesthetics, to put it mildly. What he was concerned about, it seems, was bloody great roads, and getting the job done cheaply and quickly. City architects were mere pawns in all this. One, Alwyn Sheppard Fidler, quit after clashes with Manzoni and the council: he had been demanding that time and care be taken in redeveloping and rehousing Birmingham's slums – a transgression against the bottom line. His quiescent replacement, Alan Maudsley, was jailed for corruption in the 1970s after taking bribes from the construction firm Bryants, which built much of 1960s Birmingham on his watch. Manzoni created (aptly, given the West Midlands' industrial role as Britain's Motorcity) a landscape where the car lorded it over everything. It's fascinating and horrible to watch the way that, even in a case so bluffly obnoxious as Manzoni's, the early stuff was pretty fine. Just outside New Street station, Smallbrook Queensway is, for sure, noisy and unpleasant for any passing pedestrian; but it was also designed with his presence in

mind, with curving, patterned buildings and shops underneath sheltered from the rain. But by the time you get to the Sentinels that coherence has become a series of vast intersections, under and overpasses, which are quite exciting to be driven through, for what that's worth. The fact that an apparatus so gigantic is needed makes clear just how giant a city it serves.

Much more typically Manzoni is New Street station itself, a structure which even the most dedicated defender of 1960s planning can find absolutely nothing good to say about. While the road infrastructure of Birmingham is massive and unavoidable, the railways are hidden away here behind a nondescript long block. What is similar in both is their beastliness for those on foot, which is a likely means of locomotion when en route to a train. Amid the station's low ceilings, horrible lighting and dank platforms, the lineaments of Manzoni's Birmingham become clear – you would exit from your car at New Street for a short space of time, and only because for some reason you were now going to take a train; your presence in the station would be as brief as possible. At no point would you care to take in your surroundings, linger, wander about even. In that Manzoni was a prophet of the seamless, sealed-in retailscape of postmodernity, rather than some modernist relic. Even here, there's a good idea lost in shoddy execution: a tower of public housing built into the New Street complex, folding a working-class population into the inner city – as unusual an idea then as it is now. And that punitive ring-road, by keeping traffic out, does at least ensure that a walkable centre could exist within it.

An ensemble that encompasses what is frustrating and what is great about Birmingham can be found at the entrance to Chinatown, just a little further along the Queensway. First, there are the two residential local authority towers known as the 'Sentinels'. The story goes that Birmingham's civic fathers visited Chicago – a good start, there – and saw the way Bertrand Goldberg's Marina City towers provided a sort of gateway, a focus for the city, while providing inner-city, high density housing – this in a city which had hitherto preferred suburban sprawl. So they constructed their own equivalent. That's where the similarities end. Marina City is a sophisticated, complex piece of architecture,

with a distinctive and original design. The Sentinels, designed by the city architect's corrupter, Bryants Ltd, are just two system-built megaliths, of zero distinction. Not far short of the height of the Barbican or Trellick Tower, they totally lack their ambitions towards 'architecture', towards something tectonically or materially exciting. Clearly, what impressed Birmingham Council in Chicago was Bigness, period. The next episode is more happily typical of Birmingham: by all accounts the towers have been well-liked by residents and fairly well maintained, and recently were renovated rather than demolished. In between them, Mancunian New Labour architect Ian Simpson has added another residential tower for developers Beethams, which is – like the Sentinels – very big and very dumb, with a drizzly green and blue barcode façade and a spreading silhouette. In the process an accidental composition has been pulled together, with the three almost axial in their effect. A mess starts to look deliberate. Just below it is a Pagoda, to denote you're in Chinatown – another strong vertical; more so than a squat Welsh-language church (!) next door, which is the smallest and least attention-seeking thing in sight. If each component of this intersection had had some love or even intent put into it, this could be wonderful. But the persistent vacuity and money-grubbing behind it all never stops showing its face.

Just around the corner, at the centre of Chinatown, is a bit more of the nearly-wonderful: the Arcadian, a multilevel retail complex designed in 1990 by Faulkner-Browns, which nearly creates the requisite *Blade Runner* bustle – especially at night, when you can't see the mock-Victorian brickwork. Like everything in the centre of Birmingham it is extraordinarily dense. Much of Chinatown is taken up with wholesalers ensconced in very small industrial units, largely post-war – miniature metalworks, one-storey in brick, sometimes with modernist strip windows or a bit of dashing typography for the archaeologist. You can almost see here the boom-years' developers waiting on each little unit to go bust in order to build one of the hypertrophied apartment blocks that are ubiquitous here. The process is underway at one corner by Essex Street, where warehouses and pubs have shrubs growing out of them, next to the yuppiedromes. The latter were designed by Glenn Howells, a local proponent of a modernism that is perhaps

unassuming and personality-free enough to be a real example of some sort of New Brum Modesty that is everywhere else quite absent. As ever, there's a catchy name – one set of blocks is 'Southside', the other is 'i-Land', surely the definitive urban-regeneration place name. It combines not only the modish nod to new media and the implication of fuck-you-jack individualism, but also the all-important suggestion that you are in an enclave, where not just anyone is allowed to live. This is a hard thing to sustain in an industrial area next to a council estate, littered still with the rusting curtain walls of derelict post-war office blocks. The point is made even more clearly by a large billboard of a wrestler nearby that declares 'BIRMINGHAM – BUILT FOR MEN'. In Manchester they'd probably have prosecuted whoever put that up for lowering the tone.

Birmingham feels less gentrifiable than its slightly smaller Lancastrian rival; the casual friendliness that is apparent on even short acquaintance is particularly un-Mancunian. Yet its centre is at least as over-packed as Manchester's with residential towers for the boom's bourgeoisie. And while in Cottonopolis the general dick-waving boosterism meant a certain amount of quality control, nothing of the sort is apparent in Birmingham. Developments like Southside and 'i-Land', with their restrained palette, and Howells' sober masonry, are architecturally atypical, as we will soon see. Where they aren't atypical is in their heavy overdevelopment, a density which allows only for tiny, shadowy 'public' spaces in between the blocks.

When wandering around the other side of New Street, the feeling is of being crushed by some sort of architectural pile-up. Huge postmodernist '80s complexes; the functionalist arse-ends of office blocks which turn out to be neo-Georgian at the front; scattered pieces of infrastructure; and, sandwiched in between, some perfectly decent pieces of architecture fighting to get out – something that is almost comic when you find a tiny Arts and Crafts building forcing an unexpected dip between two of these behemoths. There are several towers, and the skyline they create is best as an abstract, seen from a distance, where their illegibility becomes a virtue. Up close, the most interesting were designed by the local firm of John Madin in the 1970s, showing

the two possible routes a skyscraper could take in that decade. One, the NatWest Tower, is futuristic concrete expressionism, a praying mantis in brown concrete and purple engineering brick, throwing up its antennae as if against an opponent; inescapably sinister, but also imaginative, well-made, memorable. The other, Metropolitan House, is something a lot more slick – mirrorglass and stone, rather than concrete Gothic – but it shares the intention to create a distinctive creature on the skyline. It shouldn't be much to ask of a skyscraper, a building that will be daily visible to the inhabitants of a city, that it factor in that repetition – that it not be one repeated note. The conscientiousness shown by Madin was not the norm, but while we're in corporate skyscraper mode, Seifert's Alpha Tower is also fine, a convincing and elegant crib from Gio Ponti's Milan. There are around a dozen lesser towers, of various eras, and they keep coming, only interrupted by recessions. The most recent casualty is the 'V Building', a patterned tower by Bluewater architect Eric Kuhne. The Orion Tower is the boom's most unpleasant legacy, a drab tower with a hideously proportioned green glass hat on top, designed by couturier John Rocha. It's interesting that the result of a fashion designer designing a piece of architecture is as unfortunate as when an 'architectural consultant' rather than an architect does so. It looks out onto Bicknell & Hamilton's New Street signal box, a utilitarian little building whose compacted concrete Vorticism shames most of the self-conscious, self-displaying architecture around it.

Anthony Hancock Lived Here

For a city that has seen several plans, it's striking how completely unplanned, accidental and messy Birmingham feels. It is now between plans, as it were – half-way between Manzoni and the Big City Plan. The latter specifically attempts to undo many of the worst effects of Manzoni's ring road, and in one place has removed an entire chunk of it. This is of course laudable, irrespective of the infrastructure's occasionally sublime effect. Now you can find a piece of one plan facing off against a piece of another, before the new rebuilding obliterates its predecessor. Corporation Street, originally intended by Birmingham's High Victorian preachers

of the civic gospel to be a Haussmann-like boulevard, features many such examples. There is here one of the somewhat better surviving parts of post-war Birmingham, Frederick Gibberd's Corporation Square mall – a well-proportioned essay in Portland Stone moderate modernism, later blanketed with tat, as is inevitable in shopping centres. Next to it is part of the successor – the tinny, cheap retail units of Martineau Place – which forms a section of Martineau Galleries, by the architects Benoy, designers of numerous shopping malls in the UK. All of them use the most distressingly cheap materials, which somehow doesn't stop them getting commissions. They have designed much of Birmingham since the 1980s, as we will see.

On the other side stands a superlative instance of what Birmingham did really, really well – wilfully tasteless, overwrought and shockingly brightly coloured late-Victorian Gothic, in red terracotta. The 1891 Law Courts by Aston Webb face the Methodist Central Hall by Ewen & J. Alfred Harper of 1900, and both are equally wild and fantastical, with materials so pulsingly red they look almost radioactive. There's a hint in this that maybe Birmingham's resistance to accepted notions of taste and decorum could be exacerbated to such an extent that it would become an active principle. They're a wonderful pair, especially given their unlikely functions serving the law and the dissenting church. The tall clock tower of the Methodist Hall looms over the central piece of public art, which is perfectly chosen: Tony Hancock nursing his tea, looking disconsolate, detailed by sculptor Bruce Williams in black and white metal to evoke a monochrome TV. Compared with the perma-grinning public art of the last two decades, it's especially refreshing that the great man got his due here. He is also perfectly placed, glowering with rueful dyspepsia at a city that is remarkable and teeth-grindingly frustrating in equal measure. Around him is a small piece of recent replanning – an area that formerly had underpasses now has pedestrian surface crossings, in order to tame the cars just a little. Yet the half-hearted nature of these measures for favouring pedestrians over cars is revealed nearby in Snow Hill station, where you can take the 'Midland Metro' – actually a tram, making Birmingham surely the biggest city in Europe not to have an integrated system

of high-speed public transport. The Metro's logo is a coiled little sign that resembles a snail.

Two districts of the centre have faced comprehensive replanning since the 1990s, both as privately owned, privately patrolled non-public urbanism, one for business and one for retail. The former is Brindleyplace, a mid-1990s attempt at reasonably careful New Urbanist planning around a series of central squares, with an agreed palette of materials and heights, each building making some effort to co-ordinate with the others. In its largely conservative modernist designs it proved something of a guide for the revived modernism of New Labour (although its coherence evidently didn't provide much of a model for the speculative scuffle of the new skyline). This makes it all the more curious that its most interesting building by far is a traditionalist one – albeit on a metropolitan scale, something neoclassical architects in the UK usually falter on. Demetri Porphyrios' eerie No. 3 Brindleyplace is flat, with no depth at all to its red-brick masonry, but its details are still rather chillingly precise, with carefully tapered, angular arcades to the ground floor and a square tower. The effect – an overscaled eclectic classicism, with much of the detail placed on levels that you have to crane your neck to see – inescapably brings to mind the Stalinist towers of 1940s Eastern Europe. It is not a loveable building, but in managing to carry to completion an idea, in establishing a definite atmosphere, it is more admirable than the pseudomodernism all around – especially Norman Foster's SeaLife Centre, a tin shack that he surely leaves out of his glossy anthologies. No. 3 Brindleyplace is entirely exceptional in its level of conviction and metropolitanism, far less typical of contemporary neoclassicism than the provincial neo-Edwardian of Quinlan Terry and Robert Adam; but the challenge it throws down to Birmingham's new modernism has not been taken up.

The Bullring, the piece of private retail replanning, is similarly a matter of one 'foreground' building and the rest as background, though here the background is provided by Benoy rather than Allies and Morrison and hence is far worse: tinny things in glass and plastic housing the usual brands, occasionally relieved by something mildly interesting – a bit of Festival Style from the '50s, or an eight-storey '30s halfscrapper now housing

Waterstones. The foreground building, and one of the supreme architectural images of the boom, is Selfridges, designed by architects Jan Kaplicky and Amanda Levette, known as Future Systems until Kaplicky's recent untimely death. It is a coat of shiny round panels fitted onto an undulating frame, which is hardly perceptible from inside the building itself. What the design is meant to do is provide a completely unique, completely fearless image, and what happens inside is fairly irrelevant – although the shiny, blingy look is clearly tailored to Selfridges' aspirational shopping. As their name implies, Future Systems had no time for the cowardly architectural bet-hedging that is so dominant in contemporary Birmingham, and made a 'statement'. A statement bolted onto the corner of a thumpingly banal shopping mall as a concession to architectural value, but a statement nonetheless. Whatever its disputable merits as ego-driven architecture, as an object on the skyline, viewed from the east of the city centre, it's enduringly surreal, fitting the overdriven chaos.

Although Corporation Street, Brindleyplace and the Bullring all try to eliminate the multilevel city in favour of something walkable for pedestrians, some aspects of the Big City Plan are not so grounded. The walkways and underpasses ploughed through the town under Manzoni and his immediate successors, articulating the subordination of aesthetics to circulation, established a multilevel principle that endures, for good and ill. Two buildings which have frankly embarrassing façades – Associated Architects' stodgy pseudomodernist Mailbox and Make's typically fussy, overdesigned Cube, made up of dozens of little geometric panels earning it the nickname 'Tetris' – work as (semi-)public space much better than they do as urban scenery. Both connect themselves to the internal and external walkways threading along the robustly, if slightly cloyingly, landscaped and yuppiedrome-strewn canal paths. Associated's less fancy building is superior. The space in front manages to make a walk under a huge underpass feel somehow aspirational; inside, a series of open galleries and skyways ends in a Harvey Nichols that appears to be suspended in air. It's a rare instance of exclusive luxury urbanism managing to create a sense of real urban drama, at least for those who are admitted – the council estates of Ladywood are

close enough to necessitate some very, very heavy security. By comparison, Make's is a ghost mall full of empty shops, fiddly geometries and creepy public art – figures with hearts for heads on the inside, advertisements for the empty and now unsellable flats on the outside that feature a corset-clad woman without a head. There's a point being made here somewhere.

Halfway to Paradise Place

At the middle of this is a distinct and clear civic heart, which is at first a grounded, Victorian thing and then raises itself up a level. It is another place which could be wonderful but due to general negligence and cheapness never quite becomes it. Nonetheless, the main ensemble is excellent. At the middle is Hansom and Welch's Town Hall, a Roman temple designed by two utopian socialist supporters of Robert Owen – the use of Roman models was apparently designed to evoke the Republic, not the Empire. In its slightly crumbly-looking travertine, it conveys an appropriately antiquarian and dignified air. A Black Sabbath-themed Gormley sculpture stands adjacent. Around it are somewhat more prosaic Victorian baroque public buildings, never quite with the scale they would have had in Glasgow, Manchester or Liverpool, but decent enough. One of them, the Council House, features an archway that neatly frames the Ziggurat of Birmingham Central Library. Walk under it and you find out just how well-composed the ensemble is – the Town Hall, the Council House and the Library are perfectly placed in relation to each other, with the set of steps that spills down from the Library and the neo-Gothic Chamberlain monument uniting the whole. It's a lesson in sensitive, planned, humanist urbanism that the rest of the city was entirely uninterested in learning; and the contemporary city is no exception, largely because the building at the centre of it is made of concrete.

The Central Library is another design of John Madin's, and it has become a minor cause célèbre of late, with a campaign to save it from demolition that has received roughly equal support and derision. Like Preston Bus Station or Robin Hood Gardens, it has become some sort of Euston Arch of Brutalism, a piece of major



architecture about to be sacrificed for the sake of speculation and property. As with Preston Bus Station, English Heritage has made more than one application to have it listed, only to be turned down by the secretary of state, most likely due to the intensity of local government lobbying to the effect that only this awful concrete hulk stands between us and a glorious regenerated future. Since the financial crash this kind of rhetoric is declining somewhat, but probably too late to save the Library. It is, it should be noted, very much a classical building – the sort of thing Cedric Price derided as the Middle Ages with electricity. The building was supposed to be clad in travertine, like the Town Hall – Madin was overruled here by City Architect Alan Maudsley, around the time he was receiving bungs from builders. And the Library was even designed with the Golden Section. Somehow, its lack of ornament and its cladding material has made this entirely humanistic structure seem like some malevolent bunker.

As so often, the attempts to improve it have only made things shoddier. At the centre is Paradise Place, a public space around a huge atrium, with the library's activity buzzing above you. In order to 'humanize' it, a Spar, a McDonald's and a Wetherspoons were shoehorned into the space in the 1990s. The result is grim,

although the principle – bringing activity into the library – is entirely sensible. Inside, the Library is a remarkably legible space even now, although nothing has been replaced or renovated for ages due to the long-imminent demolition. The different layers and levels all flow together along the escalators, with large reading areas – it feels very much like a University Library, with little of the books-can-be-fun jollity that public libraries today generally indulge in. Thanks to the intercession of a friend, I manage to get a tour around the place from staff. It's clear there are service areas that don't work, that the storage is too small, and that there's much in the building that would need major redevelopment were it to be able to continue. I didn't see anything, though, that proved the building to be obsolete or unusable. Even a moderately talented architect could easily redesign the Library so that it worked for its original function or could be easily converted to something else. The replacement, however, is nearly already here.

It is designed by the Dutch architects Mecanoo, as a mega-library on a huge scale – in line with the Big City Plan – and may potentially be a decent enough building. The architects have evidently spent much time consulting with the librarians, and in a situation where the Tory–Whig coalition is closing libraries en masse, it might seem churlish to complain about a new one being built. The difference, interestingly enough given the government's shibboleths, is one of localism. Mecanoo's Library is tectonically similar to several other buildings by the same firm: here the pattern on the glass represents Birmingham's industry, elsewhere it doubtless represents something similar in some other post-industrial town. It will also be an off-the-peg product of a firm who aren't terribly bothered about Birmingham. Madin's Library was a unique solution, rooted deeply in place, by architects who lived in and knew their city. It's sad, given Birmingham's recent wave of bullish municipal chauvinism, that this deeply local modernism will be supplanted by an international firm's signature. With that, a little portion of the Big City Plan will be completed.

A Thousand Trades and One Great Wasteland

Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is now a kind of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* for urbanists, a common-sense compendium; rather less famous now is her subsequent *The Economy of Cities*, although both featured on Sir Keith Joseph's reading list to the Tory Cabinet in 1979, perceived (not altogether fairly) as jeremiads against state intervention. *The Economy of Cities* is an exercise in homespun pseudo-history which, among other things, claims that cities precede agriculture. Another of the book's novelties is a counterblast against Marx's notion that the future lay in the likes of Manchester, single-industry cities producing a single consumer commodity via the labour of an unskilled proletariat; according to Jacobs, via her reading of Asa Briggs, the real model, which he and Engels missed, was Birmingham, an unplanned jumble where hundreds of different products were produced, often by skilled artisans; an urban ecosystem that was able to adapt to changes in the market and technology. Although the Mancunian model seems to be the one favoured by contemporary China, not to mention the highly Mancunian deskilling of most forms of blue- and white-collar work around the world, there's evidently a truth in Jacobs's distinction (if we accept that capitalism is the only game in town, a somewhat foolish assumption at present). Single-industry cities are clearly not a clever idea. But there are a couple of niggles with this. One is, frankly, the aesthete's objection. In the textile-producing cities of West Yorkshire, say, each 'opolis' produced something quite distinct from its neighbour, and each developed in a very specific way; Halifax (wool) never looks like Wakefield (coal) which never looks like Bradford (worsted) which never looks like Leeds (flax, engineering), although given that each of these now produces little, the distinction is purely historical. But the average street in West Bromwich looks much like the average street in Birmingham which looks like the average street in Dudley which looks like the average street in Walsall; only Coventry manages to be architecturally distinctive. Each was a factory town, but producing a dizzying array of different goods. The second objection is that Birmingham and the Black

Country were hit surely as hard by economic depressions as anywhere else. Although Harvey Nichols in the Mailbox is still open, the area as a whole is, along with Teesside, the hardest hit in the UK. Without investment in manufacturing, that seems unlikely to change.

That doesn't quite excuse the wilful blindness of the city's relation to its industrial past, or rather to its industrial present. The most central industrial area in Birmingham is Digbeth, currently being imaginatively rebranded as 'Eastside'. This is the place where the boom stopped, mid-demolition; a scarred landscape that is, or should be, quite shocking. The part of it that is half-complete is the serendipitously-named Masshouse. This is, like the rest of central Birmingham, extremely high-density. Red-brick-clad towers of flats curve around the PFI circus that is the Matthew Boulton Campus of the University of Aston, with a concrete remnant of the pre-cladding era caught in between. What catches the eye, however, are the two towers of Masshouse Circus, whose name – inspired by the proximity of Pugin's red-brick Catholic Cathedral – seems to carry a more literal meaning, that of packing in huge quantities of what in the 1920s were called 'minimum dwellings'. The towers that contain them, both of



concrete frame with white and black cladding to ‘break up the massing’, are truly enormous, not so much for their height but for their extreme, sprawling bulk. More of these were to follow, but at present the site is ended by a black fence.

Past the black fence lies a green expanse. It is a remarkable transition, marking the change from the packed-in, claustrophobic centre to the low-density, scatter of small-scale buildings that defines most of the rest of the conurbation. It happens with incredible suddenness, as some kind of boundary, a no-man’s-land. It is of course accidental. This wasteland is not even a putative building site – if it were, it would be ringed by another fence, even if nothing was happening inside. In fact it’s a wasteland waiting to become a park. At present it feels more of a heath, demarcated by low wooden fences and criss-crossed by roads. It forms a breathing space where you can mark and meditate upon the city centre you have just left, a locus of inadvertent contemplation. Like a surreal accidental post-war planning scheme, it is a place of object-buildings in space, without any kind of street or any coherent structure around them to give them ‘life’. Each is a weird, decontextualized remnant. Principal among them is the long-decommissioned Curzon Street Station, an Ionic temple in ashlar, giving off an appropriately heathen atmosphere. On a corner is one of those lurid scarlet pubs that enliven the townscape around here, boarded-up, with the Sky Sports ads still fluttering in the wind outside. Further on from there is Millennium Point, Digbeth’s major Blairite project, a Museum of Science and Industry designed by Nicholas Grimshaw. It is not an urban building. A long, low, brittle glass block framed by a wide car park, the effect is like walking from a city centre into an exurban science park. Inside, the obligatory atrium bristles with cold steel staircases and, helpfully for the tired flâneur, a café and toilet. A large group of secondary-school children are being shown round; their coach is outside. It is telling that the main urban interventions here – the ‘park’, this building – are so damaging to any urban ambitions the place may have.

Apart from that, Digbeth is still a place of factories, small in scale and diverse in trade, but factories nonetheless. I’m here at nine in the morning, as non-loft-living people are parking their

cars and going into their workplaces or nursing cups of tea in the cafés on the high street. A friend tells me how all the surviving light industry is frustrating the council's evident desire to impose the new immaterial economy on the place. The Big City Plan does not zone this as an industrial area, but that is still largely what it is. The urban structure is very unlike that of the Industrial North, as befits the different industrial structure: it looks not so much like cottage industry as townhouse industry. Some of the ranges here are practically Georgian, with delicate classical door surrounds built onto the hard brick. Others are more obviously Victorian, with neo-Gothic details leading to sawtooth-roofed sheds. They make a noise, they have smells. Is it mere nostalgia to be impressed by this, to want it to remain as industry rather than be converted to housing? Given the all-party consensus on 'making things again', irrespective of the total lack of policy to go with the rhetoric, it would seem obvious that this should be preserved and extended. More typical of city policy here however is the Custard Factory, a lone outpost of gentrification under a viaduct, a conversion by Glenn Howells offering flats and units for the 'creative industries'. Architecturally, it is defined by unusual semi-circular protrusions onto a glass façade, looking chicly 'industrial' rather than being so. Opposite is a scrapyard, and a wall of crushed cars.

Walking through these ranges of low-rise workshops, you arrive at Deritend, an even more disconnected district. The light industry and derelict pubs are the same, but a larger scale has crept in, in some corners. Towering over all is the Paragon Hotel, a mammoth creature with turrets and overripe sculptures – a cherub parking himself rudely on an upside-down column, framed by practically pubic acanthus. The immediate question of 'what on earth is this doing here?' is answered, after a fashion. The hotel is the only thing anywhere nearby that could possibly persuade you that this is the East End of Britain's second-largest metropolis. It is an almost-identical copy of another building in Whitechapel, in London's East End – the 'monster doss-house' described by Jack London in his account of belle-époque penury, *The People of the Abyss*. While the Whitechapel version is now luxury flats, the Second City's clone became a budget hotel (providing, I might

add, my bed for the night). Deritend is not quite the abyss, but it is a peculiar place for a hotel, given that apart from factories it consists of a system-built housing estate, clad in various kinds of jolly 1980s pattern, now gone grimy and sad. There are few places in Britain that feel as lost and discombobulated as this. The chaotic, scattered, uncoordinated nature of the city hasn't created something exciting and vibrant and teeming. Places are lost in between its gaps.

Knowledge of Life in the UK

Mercifully, not all of Birmingham's inner city is as much of a mess as this. Get on a bus to Handsworth, get off, and the impression is of blessed relief. Handsworth and Lozells largely consist of sturdy, coherent, sharply red Victorian terraces, unremarkable but well put together, with what at this distance seem impressive levels of material competence and decorative detail, although that certainly wasn't the common opinion at the time. It even has a real, proper park in it, a fine contrast with whatever that heath at Digbeth was intended to be. After the East End's unnerving landscape, Handsworth is practically bursting with vivacity. There's much more activity, but it's calmer, less menacing. In this juxtaposition at least, Jane Jacobs may have had a point, although here too a certain grimness lurks, further below the surface. The high street running through it, Soho Road, is marked by a couple of grandiose civic buildings, opposite a shopping parade, gradually giving way to industry and the Hockley Flyover. The spot where I begin is just outside Handsworth Council House and Library, an 1877 design by William Henman. It has all the unpretentious vim and glaring ungainliness that marks the more interesting Brum buildings. Absurdly busy in its massing and skyline, it is in a strange Anglia vernacular that throws together Gothic, Tudor, Arts and Crafts and whatever else the architect had lying around as long as it was untainted by the Continent, modelled in more of that rough, bright red brick. There are asymmetrical towers, capped with little miniature roofs; green timbering marks the pinnacles of a heavy, stodgy clock tower. Even municipalism here flirted wilfully with kitsch.



The other civic monument, further up Soho Road, is the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, a Sikh Gurdwara and social centre, apparently the largest outside of the Punjab. According to the account I find in a Handsworth History walker's leaflet, it was gradually converted and extended out of older buildings. If so, it takes the prosaic notion of adaptive re-use and runs with it somewhere else entirely. Onto what was presumably a red-brick industrial shell is placed a continuous façade in a glistening, polished material that surely can't be stone, with frames in purple tiling. Above that is a continuous spiky attic with miniature domes; the central entrance features cantilevered little windows, with spreading, shallow domes above. It's not a building that fails to hold the attention. In their upstanding purpose, their proud skyline, their total lack of ironic distance and their traditionalist eclecticism of style, buildings like this are our real neo-Victoriana. If it weren't for that lack of irony, the Gurdwara would resemble the contemporary neo-postmodernism of architects like FAT or Agents of Change. It is a much more fashionable creation than it probably thinks it is. More architecturally deliberate is the structure just further along Soho Road, built as part of the same complex, the Nishkam Centre for Excellence. This one mixes our prevailing sort-of modernism, with wide expanses of glass, cheap-looking detail and a slightly wonky roof, with more traditional Sikh motifs, where structural steel is decorated with spiked turrets. Eight months after the photo here as taken, these

buildings were defended by lines of Sikhs during the August Riots, incurring the praise of David Cameron, though it should be noted that the Bullring was the rioters' main, somewhat less intercommunal target.

Soho Road's coherence starts to scatter after a little while. Classical fragments and gigantic pubs turned curry houses are found in amongst Edwardian shopping parades with bridal wear downstairs. Look at the spaces above and you find various ad hoc community services. 'Knowledge of Life in the UK – Citizenship Test – Accredited Examination Centre' helps newcomers to pass a test that would be failed by the overwhelming majority of 'indigenous' Brits. Factories start to take over, or rather former factories do. One of them, a long, post-war effort, is now a Jobcentre. Another is an electrical warehouse. More, like the twentieth-century neo-Georgian Supreme Works, with its porthole windows and reliefs of metalworkers, are derelict. The smaller Babe Ke Gurdwara can be found round a corner, less shiny, more marked by the area's hardness and industrialism, built from what looks like breeze blocks. Its turrets and pinnacles are affixed with an asymmetry that, again, along with the pious function, would have pleased High Church High Victorians more than most things in contemporary Brum. The factories become bigger, the road gets more monumentally obnoxious, and you find yourself at Hockley Circus. There is a 'Metro' stop here, with a public sculpture of a pile of coins, and an almost metropolitan view of the Birmingham skyline, the BT Tower most prominent. There's something much, much better just below, though. Something very special indeed.

Underneath the Flyover, a piece of non-utilitarian design somehow slipped through the municipal net. William Mitchell is a sculptor who exemplifies the changes in public art. In the 1960s and 70s he designed dozens of reliefs, from Sheffield to Salford, to adorn anything from universities to shopping streets. He ended up designing figurative monuments to the late Diana Spencer. Hockley Circus, however, is his masterpiece, a magnificent and entirely unused central space lying between the diversity and poverty of Handsworth and Lozells, and the somewhat more favoured 'Jewellery Quarter'. Hockley Circus's bench-lined open space feels like it was built for sound systems,

with basslines bouncing between the concrete sculptures and stanchions, although that seems doubtfully part of Mitchell's (or Manzoni's) intention. The sculptor's contribution, shadowed by the motorway above, was a series of grey and red concrete panels with semi-abstract reliefs scratched and shuttered into them. Each panel is subdivided into small sections, with some kind of dynamic, interstellar detail crammed inside: plant life, exploding stars, bacteria, crustaceans, caves. There's something Assyrian or Sumerian about it all, a groping towards transcendence and the intangible, somewhere between engineering drawings and hieratic sculpture. This really is an absolutely extraordinary space, one of the most awesomely modern places in the UK, and when Manzoni's infrastructure faces the cuts of a twenty-first-century Beeching Report (if we're so lucky) then it should be kept as an astonishing example of post-war rationalism creating a space that is genuinely uncanny. It is, at the very least, Birmingham's finest work of art, and links perfectly with the more 'democratic' wildstyle tags just further inside the underpasses that lead to the Jewellery Quarter, and something a lot less modernist.

This place is still zoned as industry, it is allowed to be industry. Why? Because passing time and changing tastes have turned it somehow into cottage industry. The same kind of small, sometimes Gothic, sometimes classical factories that crowd round the wasteland in Digbeth are here very well treated. They are a rewarding walk, partly for architectural reasons – there's a lot to look at, from the art nouveau of Crowngate House to the proto-modernist white concrete and picture windows of Gem Buildings – but also because unlike in the 'Eastside' there is infrastructure, cafés, shops, (non-derelict) pubs, people, and the unmistakable presence of money. It is all ostentatiously village-like, with a cast-iron clock tower at the centre. There's a Georgian square, with a green and an excellent eighteenth-century church, feeling suspiciously planned for Birmingham. On the subject of planning, there were attempts to move the little workshops into larger structures like the Hockley Centre, which failed. As it is, the picturesque irregularity combined with the closely defined purpose make the Jewellery Quarter inner Brum's single convincing tourist destination. The FA Cup was designed here,

says a plaque embedded in the pavement. Signs offer ‘Palladium Wedding Rings, Titanium Wedding Rings, Diamond Set’. It’s remarkable that this area of industrial production manages to survive in our current recession. The nature of the production is telling: factories, foundries, even car plants are closed or closing, but hand-made, individually crafted jewellery somehow continues. Given that it is a regenerated area, the Jewellery Quarter also has a few shoddy high-density spec housing schemes; in one of them is a Jobcentre, with the entrance topped by the typically ’00s flourish, that swoopy, Blairy roof.

The Future of Municipal Housing

Birmingham was a pioneer in what came to be called municipal socialism, defined as local authorities taking various services that work poorly when run for profit – transport, energy, drainage – and managing them for the good of the city’s residents. Irrespective of the ‘s’ word, this was originally a project of the Liberal Party, and it’s a sign of how far we’ve sunk that nationalizing a railway is now considered tantamount to organizing a command economy. Banks, of course, are another matter. Municipal housing is less noted here than in cities of comparable size, with much effort before 1945 going into the building of sprawling, peripheral garden suburbs, after the model of the confectionery company town Bourneville, to the south of the city. One of Manzoni’s ideas was to densify, building flats rather than houses, and the results in the centre, or in featureless tower-block burbs like Castle Vale, have generally discredited the idea; daughter of Chelmsley Wood Lynsey Hanley’s account of these places in *Estates* presents an isolated and isolating landscape designed to clear the waiting list as cheaply as possible, and nothing more.

It was an enormous surprise, then, to chance upon the Chamberlain Gardens estate in Ladywood. Ladywood has the highest level of unemployment in the UK, and has been at or near the top for some time. Most of it consists of uninteresting towers, occasionally clad, occasionally replaced with equally uninteresting mock-Victorian hutches. But you get a sense of something different when walking along the main Ladywood



Middleway: suddenly you're in a landscaped parkway, verdant by the surrounding standards. Inside, ten eight-storey towers, carefully detailed in brown brick and concrete, are interspersed with terraced bungalows. Around them is an undulating landscape of mature trees, taken over from the gardens of middle-class Victorian houses. It feels just, an assertion of the working-class population's collective right to light, air, birdsong and greenery in a city full of wasted land and unchallenged privilege. It's an approximate Ville Radieuse, in that the other part of the Corbusian programme – the parkland, the sense of openness and verdure – is fully implemented. Up close you see the grime on the towers, but for British council housing it is remarkably well-preserved, calm and attractive, and you can walk to the city centre in five minutes. Why wasn't it all like this? Why can't it be done again?

This was a project of the earlier City Architect Alwyn Sheppard-Fidler, the one who was pushed out because of his insistence that the rehousing of post-war Birmingham would take time and money. This wouldn't do for the city council. They had their reasons: the problem was urgent, people needed homes quickly, and the city hardly had limitless funds; besides, there were elections to fight on the question of how many houses they could build. But the money they must have spent since, not only in court but also in recladdings and demolitions, suggests it was

only ever a partial solution, even on these parsimonious terms. Birmingham hasn't had municipal housing since the 1970s, or not until 2010. Strangely enough, Birmingham City Council (run since 2004 by a prophetic Tory–Whig coalition) has been the first major city to return to serious building of council housing. Yet this element plays little role in the Big City Plan – in the event, it seems like its exact opposite. Rather than the wholesale clearances and high-density, high-rise (albeit low-quality) schemes happening in Digbeth, these are the other side of the Brum pendulum – small-scale, incremental, contextual, houses with gardens adding up to tiny infill estates inserted into the existing urban fabric, with no return to the utopianism of Chamberlain Gardens. The obvious question is whether the previous problem of cutting costs and contracting out the seemingly superfluous things – architectural detailing, careful planning – to builders and developers can be avoided this time.

The Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust, the public body that is building this stuff, has had to make certain compromises in order to stay within the neoliberal parameters of local governance – that is, to come up with a way to make it profitable for private developers to co-operate with them; in the contracting out, via outsourcers like Capita, of the actual construction to knock-'em-up-cheap firms like Lovells and Kier, there is the inescapable taint of PFI. Some of the houses are being offered for sale. But it's also shameful that it has taken a coalition of Tories and Liberals to return to what should be basic Labour policy: the construction of public housing to be let to people on the council list. Not the fudges of 'affordable' or 'social' housing, which means anything from shared ownership to studio flats, rather than what we have here – large family homes with, initially at least, space standards far above the norm for private housing in the city. Even in somewhere as luxurious as 'i-Land'.

I saw three of the new estates, all designed by local firm Axis Design Group. The first of these was Morville Street, comprising twenty-eight houses just at the other end of Ladywood. The planned houses, as could be seen in the hoardings over the building site, had red-tile roofs and were rendered, in white, black and yellow, as a reference to the colours of a crisp 1960s school



next door. What you can see there now has a façade of bare red brick and black-tiled roofs. Those are pretty big liberties right there. They appear as standard developers' houses that had been planned with unusual intelligence, as if a conscientious town planner had accidentally ended up working for Taylor Wimpey.

All three estates had much the same effect. The best of the three in managing to transcend the grim results of the contracting system was the thirty-three-house Pershore Road estate in Balsall Heath, south of the centre, which had its first residents moving in the month I visited. The area is itself a typically, frustratingly Birmingham place, with mock-Tudor villas, vague in-between spaces, and a dour but fairly decent low-rise 1960s estate, plus immense new spec blocks in the near distance. Pershore Road shuns the latter, as well it might, and instead tries to provide a transition between the mock Tudor and the post-war terraces. At its heart, as in Ladywood, is a daringly public, non-'defensible' space, a wedge of green, and how the architects managed to get that past the police's Secured by Design regulations is a feat in itself. The space standards are apparently at Parker-Morris levels. But, again, the houses themselves are cheap and cheerless. Every time you spot an interesting design idea that has managed to creep past the contractors – the cubic bay windows, for instance – you

immediately spot something else, like the ungainly sloping roofs that mark the changes in scale from the terraces to the semis. And the focus on contextualism and the picturesque has something to do with that; nothing is ever allowed to repeat, to cohere. On a budget this low, that's asking for trouble – something apparent above all in the smallest scheme, at Regent Road in Handsworth, where houses rise at the corners from two storeys to three, have to negotiate a slight slope, and do so with great cack-handedness. Connoisseurs of architectural comedy should enjoy the joins between two of the houses, somehow worked by the builders into a weird cubist experiment.

These homes appear to have been designed for a different public entirely to the confident towers and imaginative landscape of Chamberlain Gardens, for a people who have become frightened of scale, modernity, style. They won't fail as cataclysmically as some post-war estates did, because what they do is so much simpler – the providing of low-maintenance, straightforward houses in already dense and built-up areas, with the transition hidden as much as possible. In *Estates*, Lynsey Hanley criticizes the idea of marking out a council estate, of making clear the join between public and private housing, as well she might, given what a grossly snobbish nation we are. But do we want to respond to this situation with architectural defensiveness, rather than positive proposals for something different? This is one possible result of the aim to make council housing 'normal' and 'realistic', and since it doesn't do anything dramatic, it will not fail dramatically. But if we want to shake off the legacy of thirty years during which council housing grew to be an insult, perhaps the best way to start is by *not being ashamed of it*; by creating something with pride and grandeur, something that we could point to and say *we want the future to look like this*. Even then, given the extension of Right to Buy, not to mention the reforms to tenure and Housing Benefit being implemented by that other Tory–Whig coalition, Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust might just prove to be the final, unexpected twitchings of a long-dead corpse. To produce even the couple of hundred or so council houses that are being built now in Birmingham seems in this context like an incredible feat of philanthropy and social planning.

Living Room or Big Shed

After visiting the estates we drove out to the Black Country, to see two places where the architects were truly allowed to have their head, albeit for less obviously useful purposes. On the way I passed through some of the finest monuments of Manzonism, particularly Gravelly Hill Interchange, better known as Spaghetti Junction, the ineffably tortuous multilevel intersection that, at the time, city authorities claimed was on a par with the Pyramids. It's not an entirely idle boast, but here the sublime comes from baffling complexity rather than simplicity. During the drive to Walsall it was all but impossible to make out where Birmingham stopped and the Black Country began, with 1930s ribbon developments winding imperceptibly into each other. The centre of Walsall is considerably unlike Brum, however, mainly because of its coherent core – a compact market street leading to a church on a short hill – and the unregenerate nature of its buildings, with office blocks conspicuously lacking in brightly coloured cladding, and without more recent neighbours adding to the skyline. The boom clearly hasn't reached this far, although the crash most certainly has. There is one corner of Walsall that has been given a good going-over, although typically it peters out halfway. Untypically it includes one entirely first-rate work of architecture, perhaps the only truly great building erected in the West Midlands over the last three decades. It is part of a regeneration 'offer', a piece of offsetting against some extremely grim and anti-urban impositions.

South of the town centre, three completed projects and one unfinished project face each other. One of them, which offers us a convenient parking space, is a strip mall, the Crown Wharf Shopping Park. In 'plan' it is exactly the same as every other strip mall, sheds arched around a subtopian emptiness housing the usual chains: JD Sports, Starbucks ... This one displays timid architectural pretensions, however, with wood cladding and a sort of metal canopy over the shops, which indicates that there were Design Ambitions. A Walsall Council van was parked here on the day I visited, presumably so that they can admire their town-planning handiwork. Opposite the mall is a canal basin,

still partly lined by low-rise, sawtooth factories, but with a big wasteland in the middle – one of the many left behind by hipster property developers Urban Splash when the boom was so rudely interrupted. Just next to that is a red and blue block of newish flats, considerably worse, it should be noted, than anything Urban Splash would have built, but serving much the same microflats-as-luxury purposes. Given these extremely unpromising parameters, what is in between these two drosscapes is surprising.

First, there's an understated, pitched-roof brick and wood café by London modernists Sergison Bates. It's one of those buildings whose very unpretentiousness becomes pretentious, that seems to be reminding you how ordinary they are, that speaks the vernacular with a little too much self-consciousness – but still, a strong, urban and intelligent building that doesn't sneer at its context. It's obviously supposed to be of a piece with the building next to it: the New Art Gallery.

Especially since the crash, there's been a tendency to suggest that the building of art galleries in non-London areas of the country was somehow a bad thing in itself, rather than an uncontroversial idea that had far too much regenerative baggage invested into it – as if a gallery were able to single-handedly reverse local decline by creating jobs for baristas/'creatives' (delete according to optimism). Flash, expensive architecture and the goofy advertainment that often came with it didn't help the case much. There are a handful that will endure, and one of them is the New Art Gallery, designed like the similarly fine Nottingham Contemporary by Caruso St John. The Gallery is a tile-clad, squat watchtower looking out onto the canal and the town centre; almost exactly opposite the church spire, although as medieval precedents go it is more castle keep than parish church. As a piece of urban architecture, this is impressively and unusually civic, but it's the interior, the actual use of the thing that sets it apart, in a context where – as with, say, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art – what goes inside the building is so much less important than the 'regenerative' statement being made.

This partly comes from the fact that the New Art Gallery takes over the town's existing art collection and builds something that is obviously intended solely for its needs. In its six storeys there is

room for temporary shows – fashionable neo-music-hall sloganist ‘Bob and Roberta Smith’ was showing on this occasion – but the great attraction is the Garman Ryan collection, donated to Walsall in the 1970s by Kathleen Garman, inter-war bohemian and former resident of nearby Wednesbury. It’s a collection of impressionists, ancient sculptures and English modernists – often a matter of nuggets and fragments, but all the more fascinating for that. The works are fitted into small rooms which give out onto double-height spaces with cantilevered viewing platforms, like theatrical boxes. Here is the feeling of light, air and space that is so often aimed for in contemporary architecture, without the whacking great glass atria that are the contemporary default means of achieving it. The walls in these rooms are lined in strips of wood, which you gradually notice are of exactly the same proportions as the shuttering on the concrete surfaces elsewhere in the building – the sort of painstaking, expensive, exquisite detail that is extraordinarily hard to come by in British architecture. In some ways it’s a shorthand for the building itself. Like the place it serves, it doesn’t yell its cleverness or its care from the rooftops, but invites exploration, investigation.

How did they manage it? The New Art Gallery was a project of what we could call ‘early Blairism’, before inertia and brutality truly took hold – a lavishly lottery-funded scheme that didn’t have to squeeze its ideas through PFI consultants or hostile contractors. It appears at first like a modest building, but there’s an ambition here that is not ‘aspirational’. It doesn’t descend upon Walsall and bestow art upon it, it takes something pre-existing here and rehouses it, refocuses it, reinvigorates it. Yet there’s nothing wild or overweening here in terms of technology, nothing dramatic in terms of colour or form, and that makes it a most atypical exemplar of its era. There is, just up the road in West Bromwich, the most perfect point of comparison in a structure which can lay claim to being some kind of uber-Blairite building, the boom’s last word in the architectural rejuvenation of battered industrial towns. This is a building called The Public.

The area around it is not, truth be told, as rich in potential associations as that surrounding the New Art Gallery. The immediate ‘context’ in this corner of West Bromwich is little more

than arterial roads and sheds, car parks and kipple. The Public responds via a gigantic, purple Big Shed, the sort you'd find housing Big Yellow Self-Storage or the like. But despite the utilitarian references, and like many of the era's buildings, few ever seemed to be clear about what exactly The Public was for. It was supposed to house the local trust Jubilee Arts, providing them with a venue for performances, exhibitions and 'creative technology'. By 2006 The Public had gone into administration before it had even opened, largely due to the building's spiralling expense; although Big Sheds like this are thrown up en masse at extremely minimal cost, which made that a very puzzling outcome. For its many detractors this financial chaos is enough to damn The Public, although they tend to forget that the Georgian schemes they adore – Clifton, or Newcastle's Grainger Town – were left unfinished, trailing bankruptcies and corruption convictions in their wake. The claim that nobody knew what The Public was going to be used for could equally apply to all manner of civic buildings, from the Harris in Preston to the Pompidou Centre in Paris. If there's something wrong with The Public – and there is, there really is – then it must be to do with the building's conception itself.

The Public is the project of Will Alsop, part of a generation of architects who learnt their trade at the shoulder of the late radical modernist Cedric Price. The most famous of Price's many unbuilt buildings was The Fun Palace, devised in collaboration with East End Communist dramaturge Joan Littlewood. It was supposed to house local arts organizations in Stratford, but more than that it was supposed to encourage participatory art, a spirit of informality, and above all it was supposed to avoid the 'aura' of art, the air of intimacy, mystery and non-reproducible uniqueness that can be found in abundance at, say, the New Art Gallery in Walsall – a structure that Price would probably have considered rather High Victorian in its civic rectitude. It was not supposed to intimidate people by making them feel like this was a repository of secret and arcane knowledge to which they did not have access. The architectural response, for Price and Littlewood, was to create a context-free Big Shed, of the kind that was just starting to emerge on the edges of motorways in this period, that could



be reconfigured by its users as theatre, gallery, interactive exhibit and suchlike. It's no exaggeration to say that The Public is the nearest thing to the mythic Fun Palace to have ever been built. It shares both its ambition to provide culture and interactivity in a working-class area, and its decision to do so in a thumping great shed. This, in itself, would have been low-budget and probably successful.

The differences between The Public and the Fun Palace communicate an enormous amount about what happened to the prestigious 'signature' architect in the 1990s and 2000s. Price's Fun Palace was barely intended to be a work of architecture at all, with no elevations ever drawn, so no sense of what it would look like. It was there to be *used*, and the aesthetics were irrelevant. Had it been built it would have looked even more like a Big Yellow Storage place, or perhaps like a larger version of the InterAction Centre that Price did design in North London – an unassuming industrial structure which Price himself helped get demolished in the '90s, when the users wanted a new building that functioned better. Also is an architect-artist, a part-time painter, and his structures are full of deliberately signature, painterly touches, with devices – wonky pilotis, usually – and colours which are

always distinctively, instantly ALSOP. So just a big reconfigurable shed, even a decorated shed, wouldn't suffice, and it certainly wouldn't be sufficiently eye-catching to be Regeneration, and Regeneration is what Alsop does, as we have seen to our cost in Middlesbrough. Therefore Alsop – or, according to one source, his young assistants, working to the vaguest and least thought-out of sketches – filled the huge space with strange, bespoke, fitted objects. There are interactive passageways, where purple neon lights flicker in changing patterns. There are suspended sculptures, some working as lighting fixtures, some there to be looked at, some there as the 'creative technology' in the brief, now as dated as a Virtual Reality headset. Others, formerly interactive, are now inactive. The word 'smile', in lower case, is written out in blue lights. One of the sculpture-fittings sticks out of the façade, with randomized metallic liquid bling spilling from the shed on one side.

Occasionally these dozens of little fittings, which make The Public as opulently overstuffed as the V&A, transmit the sort of metropolitan neon excitement that is so entirely absent here in the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell. More often, they're so smugly, grinningly vacuous that it's hard to suppress the urge to vandalism. But they're each and every one tied permanently into the building, making the mooted adaptability and cheapness merely rhetorical. They also, no doubt, helped make it the most expensive Big Shed ever built in the UK. You can't get any of these fittings in a catalogue. The Public is where the ideas of post-1960s radical architecture ended up when mixed with the empty-headed optimism of New Labour and the cult of the starchitect: a profigate, incoherent kerfuffle. The Public hosts comedy shows, tea dances, plays and exhibitions, and it may quite possibly work well enough as a local arts building for West Bromwich. But if it works, it surely does so in spite of the building rather than because of it. In that, for all its industrial rhetoric, this is a building that is a great deal less functionalist, less *modernist*, than the New Art Gallery in Walsall.

'Why, Coventry!' I Exclaimed

Coventry has what Birmingham so conspicuously lacks – a sense of arrival. Coventry Station is in that sadly very select company of great post-war railway stations, at a time when the carceral interzone of Birmingham New Street was much more commonplace. There's nothing fancy, no Fosterian glass atria or Alsopian drunken pilotis; like Walsall Art Gallery, it's unassuming but generous modernism, a simple concrete box beautifully finished in wood and marble, clear, spacious and achingly hopeful, marred only by Iggy Pop's insurance adverts being stuck onto it. It is very literally the exact opposite of New Street, as brightly glassy and warm as the latter is dank and loveless. Whether that's often noticed by passengers is unclear, but what must be at least subliminally noticed is the ease of circulation and the absence of clutter and tat. The platforms are a *Brief Encounter* world of rectitude and sadness, and there is a poem there; 'I Remember, I Remember', by Philip Larkin. As a poetic entrance to the second largest component of the Metropolitan County, it could have been better chosen.

The Coventry-born Larkin, though more associated with Hull, is the perfect choice for what Coventry usually evokes in those whose knees are easily jerked: a sad, pinched, miserable Midland place. The old phrase about being 'sent to Coventry' more recently suggests being condemned to misbegotten town planning, mediocrity and decay. No city has been more traduced. The impression you receive from the station is not at all deceptive – Coventry is very special, although it doesn't always seem to know it. The central, redeveloped area of Coventry is a magnificent achievement, an antithesis to the chaotic, hyper-capitalist colossus ten minutes away, a planned city that is deeply moving in its carefulness, optimism and clear, uncomplicated elegance. It's a New Town in disguise with all the metropolitan life and energy that most New Towns lack. It is flawed, of course, tarnished by the usual neoliberal trash just like everywhere else, but on any architectural or town-planning measure, it really is difficult to praise post-war Coventry enough.

Around the station are a couple of post-war office blocks.

There's one tower, and one long, low block. One would expect to find more-or-less interesting but basically unplanned '60s/'70s towers here, but these are, typically, subtly different. Their worn glass surfaces, Anglicized reductions of American corporate modernism, aren't particularly extraordinary, though they prolong the crisp clarity of the station; but what you really notice is the way both of them accommodate cafés and shops on the ground floor – not all that astounding, but hardly fitting the monofunctional modernist stereotype. Both cross the street with glass bridges, forming a dashing gateway to the city. Simple, but effective. Next, you have to cross a ring road, and this too is usually the most unpleasant introduction to a city. Yet, after a quick walk through an underpass, you find a rare example of the motorist being subordinated to the pedestrian in a post-war traffic scheme. As walkers, it's our comfort and space that are respected by the overpasses and parklands that guide us through to the city centre, something completely unlike the usual spindly, tight concrete bridges. Apparently, drivers hate it.

For They Know Not What They Do

In many respects, the redeveloped Coventry was fairly conventional – it was largely given over to shopping, theatres, civic buildings and administration, without much in the way of housing. To that extent it stuck with the orthodoxy of the time. In fact, the impression Coventry gives is of a place that actually managed to implement fully and fearlessly a classic 1940s utopian town plan, without the fudges and fuck-ups that usually ensued once everyone saw who owned the plots. Its ability to completely realize its plan might have come from the place's huge symbolic importance, being the city so pummelled by bombs that a new German verb, *Coventrieren*, was created to describe it. Nowhere else – not entirely fairly – so completely stood for the Blitz, and hence for the response to the war. The result is a kind of Beveridge Report in concrete, copper and brick. The designers of the place – chiefly the municipal architect Donald Gibson and, later, Arthur Ling – were praised to the skies at the time and are almost entirely forgotten now, though the urban form they created is at least as

impressive as what more avant-garde modernists proposed in its place. Praise of Coventry (particularly from an unrepentant, revisionist modernist) is easily dismissed as the ramblings of concrete fetishists, of architectural snobs in love with overbearing 'heroic' grandiosity; but in this particular case, the replanning was so sensitively scaled, carefully built and tentative in architectural form that the criticism is misplaced. There's nothing here that would impress a correspondent from a fashionable architectural magazine, no shuttered-concrete experiments in geometry, no enormous streets-in-the-sky housing schemes, much as these are themselves things worth defending. Modernist Coventry is careful, reverent (the entire ensemble is planned around church spires!) and almost absurdly English in its embrace of compromise. The real dogmatists are those who would dismiss the city simply because it (was) new.

The centre is based around a series of interconnected precincts, fading into each other across an axial expanse. There are four points of orientation: a church spire, a cathedral, two post-war towers. The entire plan is designed to accentuate them. In that, it's a rather classical, beaux-arts piece of urbanism, although the multiple levels and changes of scale are thoroughly twentieth-century. A compromise taken to a level of unexpected brilliance, like the symmetrical Gothic of the Houses of Parliament, or the medieval-plan baroque of St Paul's.

The nearest part of this central ensemble to the station is Bull Yard, dressed in thin, gorgeous dark green copper fins, with a pop-futurist arcade inside and an extremely strange concrete relief sculpture of what looks like random sea life outside, just next to the Three Tuns pub. It's another oddly primal design by William Mitchell, and the contrast with his more crazed, monumental work in Hockley Circus suggests the very different approaches that should be taken to the two cities. Then there's a public square around a statue of Lady Godiva. The statue is as respectful as possible of the bare-bosomed mythical heroine, but that can't be said of the clock opposite, where a small, surrealist figure of her prances out on her horse every hour on the hour. I waited around a bit to see this. The buildings, one now a Travelodge (but not as architecturally traumatized as this would

imply) display a particularly English, dry, compromised but sharply elegant post-war modernism, with brick dressings and boxed-out strip windows framed in Portland stone, raised on pilotis to offer shelter from the rain. An unashamed background to the foreground of the towers and the spires.

A truly terrible thing has happened to the Upper Precinct, the then most-photographed part of the planned centre, whose multilevel structure was copied everywhere from Rotterdam to Singapore. The buildings and their walkways directly gave way to the Cathedral, until that view was blocked by the appalling 1989 Cathedral Lanes shopping centre. This piece of hideously retrograde postmodernism illustrates Denis Healey's claim that *laissez-faire* was kept off the political agenda until the generation that fought the war had retired or died off. It's the architectural equivalent of the cult of Churchill, that forgets how the man and what he represented was slung out by the electorate on a landslide, in favour of socialism. The generation that *didn't* fight the war, that *didn't* create a welfare state, were evidently unable to cope with the clean lines, the lack of ornamentation, the optimism and confidence of Coventry Precinct. They wanted something that would baby them, reassure them, a little fragment of



traditionalism in the place where their forbears had tried to create something new. Cathedral Lanes is one of the most disgusting pieces of architectural vandalism in the UK. It has competition, however, just over the other side of the axis, in the form of the redevelopment of the Precinct itself, where tacky pitched roofs, neo-Victorian street furniture and a galumphing escalator stamp all over the 1950s buildings. The uncomprehending ignorance evokes a child scribbling over a Mondrian. There are still great things to discover in amongst all of this, albeit under roofs which evoke the architectural achievements of Luton Airport – the circular pod of the Godiva Café, for instance – but it's sad, and worse than that, pointless. The Lower Precinct, for instance, is covered by an ill-designed glass roof, despite the fact that there were already canopies against the rain. There was no functional need for this, just an urge to 'do something', so as to drive home the understanding that you were no longer in a social democratic city centre, but in a shopping mall. Central Coventry was redeveloped by a 'public-private partnership', with the city council offering itself to the Scottish Life Insurance Company and the developers Arrowcroft. The result is much as if the Festival Hall had been sold to Serco.

The peripheries of the Precinct make clear that there were problems with it, although none that required these lumpen, philistine solutions. There are now slopes rather than stairs to the upper levels, which is sensible. The Precinct sometimes meets the surrounding streets with vague service areas rather than strong connections, and this is still fairly unresolved. A large, dramatic, late '60s concrete tower on an axis by John Madin attempts to bridge one of these interstitial zones, in a manner much more strident than the buildings around; you can imagine the original architects being almost as aggrieved by it as they would have been by Cathedral Lanes. In its defence, it reasserts however violently the original future-oriented impulse; its angular, twisted skyline is a celebration of wild Midland Gothic in amongst all these coolly expressed classical modernist phrases. Another fine building in the corners of the Precinct is the city's covered market, a clever, circular design. It's a delightful space, a perfect spot for digging in – Donald McGill postcards and good second-hand books

amongst the more domestic, contemporary stalls. At the centre of the circus, under circular skylights, is a merry-go-round, as there should be. Nearby there's a mural by Gordon Cullen, moved from its previous location in the Lower Precinct, in celebration of modernist Coventry. The city's previous buildings are there, medieval and Georgian, as are several panels of penny-farthings (bicycles were mass-produced here) and (less explicable) dinosaurs. But most of the mural centres on the replanning, showing all of the city's major post-war buildings, from the Precinct itself to the Cathedral and the council estates in the suburbs – all of them drawn in a charming, witty hand. It's hard not to be moved by it, especially in view of what has happened to Coventry wherever the last thirty years has touched it. A big blue IKEA. A clumsy, garish Premier Inn. And a town plan, hopefully crushed by the recession, by American postmodernists Jerde Partnership to smash the place apart and replace it with an exurban retail park. Coventry has a Labour Council, albeit with a small but vociferous Socialist Party opposition, but they don't appear to have noticed that the boom is over, or to have any idea of what they could do now that it is. When you've sold your soul, it's difficult to ask for it back.

Memory against Rebuilding

The clearing, cleansing effect of Coventry doesn't lessen, though, it doesn't peter out in a muddle of sidings and service areas. Coventry Cathedral itself exemplifies what is so involving, so hopeful, about the city. In recent years it has been fashionable for famous Blitzed cities to rebuild the destroyed landmarks as war memorials. The impulse behind this is the same one behind Cathedral Lanes shopping centre – the rank sentimentality and imposed historical amnesia dished out by a generation of neo-liberalism. The further we get from the war, the further we get from the egalitarian politics that followed it, and the greater is the impulse to pastiche, to replicate, to forget. In the context of the largest economic collapse since the 1930s, it couldn't be more imperative to remember what *laissez-faire* followed by balancing-the-books led to seventy years ago. So the Frauenkirche

in Dresden is rebuilt, and a fake Neumarkt pops up all around it. Nothing happened here. Coventry Cathedral is the opposite of that, and is the most powerful, poignant monument in a city which is already emotionally charged.

At the time, Basil Spence's remade Cathedral was scorned by the avant-garde and embraced by the public, making it another of Coventry's many examples of how radical a compromise from the 1950s feels today. The original Cathedral was left as a ruin and a new one was built perpendicular to it, to both create a new church and to remind the passer-by at all times of what happened to the old. In that it is an angry work of architecture, an unforgetting one, and that's certainly the effect when walking round the ruined Cathedral. The sandstone walls are blackened and charred in places, the delicacy of the medieval workmanship is alternately visible and obliterated. It was evidently a vast building, and as the rain falls through where the roof would have been, it's hard to imagine that a reconstruction would have been more affecting. The effect is not sentimental – the 'Father Forgive' that is carved on the nave is fully aware of how all-but-impossible that is. The sculpture of Christ by Jacob Epstein that was placed here in the 1950s is hard, stark and proud. It's reproachful, as is the architectural gesture. The point has been missed since, of course. A realist sculpture of a gangly man and woman comforting each other features on its plinth the words 'in 1995, 50 years after the end of the Second World War, this sculpture has been given by Richard Branson as a token of reconciliation'.

The new Cathedral is apparently more forgiving, though its grey concrete vault has an almost subterranean darkness for a Cathedral, with John Piper's coloured glass appearing as glints in the gloom. The carved tablets along each side speak of the new commandment, that we love one another as He has loved us. Graham Sutherland's Christ, the building's focal point, is a vengeful figure, seemingly sitting in judgement, flanked by vicious, tortured, bloodied animals. Like the rest of the Cathedral, this tapestry is a sacrificial offering before we can embark upon the building of socialism, an evocation in all its terror of the war that led to it. Like the rest of Coventry, it has been traduced for its compromise, its harshness and conviction unnoticed. Perhaps

that's because the goal of 1945 wasn't taken seriously enough, was abandoned in spirit long before it was abandoned in letter. Perhaps. The Cathedral's precedent hasn't entirely gone to waste, as the best new structures in the city are opposite, and continue this project of remembrance and optimism. There is a decent extension to the Herbert Gallery, designed by Pringle Richard Sharratt, in sandstone and wood that is for once structural rather than stapled on and slatted. It's another seemingly mild, compromised building, but its sensitivity is conspicuous when the competition is IKEA and Premier Inn; its lightness and precision are a rare expression of a confident new Coventry in the twenty-first century. Next to it are a series of rusty COR-TEN steel stelae listing the shops and buildings that were on this spot before the bombing, brittle and raw as a gash. In contemporary Dresden, they'd have reconstructed the shops.

The contrast at the heart of the West Midlands speaks volumes about the roads not taken, architecturally as much as politically. We have two competing models, separated by the merest strip of green belt. A city built for the car, from generations of frantic speculation, practically devoid of a legible identity; another city which was rebuilt for the pedestrian, distinctive, unique, planned for human beings. Coventry is everything contemporary Birmingham, and Britain as a whole, are not. A place that had serious city-building ambitions, that made real attempts at combining modernity, history and urbanity. Birmingham's model of speculation, demolition and bluff profit-making was always more influential, however – and so it remains.



Chapter Six

Bristol: The Tyranny of Structurelessness

Lackadaisical Urbanism

Bristol is perhaps the one southern city which really feels independent of London. For whatever reason – its diversity, its distance, or, as some might darkly suggest, the internal emigration patterns of wealthy Londoners in the 1970s – it mostly lacks the lamentable parochial mentality and substandard architecture so common in the South, in the Lutons, Portsmouths, Readings, Southamptons, Guildfords and Swindons. Architecturally speaking, though, its qualities mostly derive from its previous significance as a major Atlantic port. That is: a major port of the slave trade, which left it numerous elegant but bloodstained buildings. It's evidently a very long time (200 years to be precise) since Bristol was the UK's Second City, and the port is now six miles away from the centre, at Avonmouth, but it doesn't appear to be all that bothered by either of these things. Bristol, notoriously, doesn't appear all that bothered by anything, which is its virtue but also its curse – it takes itself both too seriously (as a permanently stoned centre of alternative culture, street art and suchlike) and not seriously enough (as a modern, multicultural, working-class city – and sponsor of architecture, rather than painter on buildings). Stereotype this may be, but the place is seriously lackadaisical, and it succeeds and fails on this. Often, architecturally, this big, dynamic and multiracial city feels like it's been asleep since 1910; the awakenings, when they happen, can be like nightmares.

This isn't merely a matter of mood, subculture or music, but something fundamental about the city. As an example of the urban wastes that Bristol's general air of torpor can so easily create, there's few places better than the area around Temple Meads station, one of the worst introductions to a city in the UK – and here, happily, a deceptive one. Inside, there is a Brunel shed and then immediately outside, a cutely anachronistic Jacobethan ensemble. So far, so enjoyable. Then, in front of that, is a wasteland made up of some startlingly grim 1960s buildings, featureless developers' trash of an earlier era, devoid of the utopian elements of much municipal modernism. Surrounding these are wide and pedestrian-hostile arterial roads, and in the middle of it all, looking forlorn, is the moderne Grosvenor Hotel featured in Chris Petit's classic miserabilist 1979 road movie *Radio On*, where an almost mute existentialist drives wanly around the city. In that film, the Hotel was passed by a spindly steel flyover; that went in the 1990s, but though less modern and hence apparently less 'alienating', the road remains obnoxious and impassable. The building is minimalist, brick construction imitating concrete, with curved glass windows, half of them boarded up. It meets an earlier, baroque hotel with a series of seemingly accidentally cubist grids. Surrounding the Grosvenor is waste, rubbish, dereliction in its many forms. A nearby block is entirely covered from top to bottom by an advert for the partly publicly-owned bank, Lloyds TSB, who tell us that they're changing the way we look at our money.

But opposite all this is one of the finest, most original Gothic buildings in the UK, in the craggy, lurid form of St Mary Redcliffe. This almost cathedral-sized medieval church is unique, wilfully playing up, as if pre-emptively, to the stereotypical notion of Gothic as a matter of grottoes and gargoyles. Along the angles of the building you can trace dozens of furious little outgrowths and creatures; the entrance is the Caligarian gateway to a proto-expressionist cave. The stretched supports of the ceiling evoke a flayed corpse. The curious thing is that it doesn't feel like some authentic space of medieval irrationalism at all, but like an already mediated horror – the fifteenth century mocking itself, stretching its motifs to the point of exuberant black comedy. The

place could repay days of exploration all by itself, but as an urban structure – still the tallest in Bristol – it has no foil, is not inserted into a viable public space. It just sits there, surrounded by traffic. Recent proposals to rectify this by building a coherent city area around it have fallen foul of the motor lobby. The church-as-traffic-island seems to be the likely situation until the phantom ‘war on the motorist’ finally begins. The effect is very, very English – an exurban business park that somehow has an extraordinary medieval monument at the heart of it, and one which manages to retain its freakish power despite everything.

Then, a bridge across the floating harbour and urbanity finally starts to assert itself, with a row of large, occasionally strikingly designed, warehouses filled not too offensively with flats ‘in keeping’. The owners’ wealth can be ascertained from the pleasure boats moored outside, as densely as cars parked alongside a tight Victorian terrace. Wonky-roofed Blairism starts to appear round the edges, a more bedraggled form of affluence. After that things rapidly pick up; past the tiresome, but quintessentially Bristolian radical chic of ‘Che’s Bar’ is the frankly staggering 1869 Granary, a monumental example of the misnamed ‘Bristol Byzantine’ style. The ‘Byzantine’ of the name seems to refer more to a certain despotic power rather than specifically Eastern Orthodox architectural references – the hulking multi-storey building is dressed with Venetian Gothic detail in an English industrial red-brick. This is real port architecture, worthy of a Glasgow or a Hamburg, and you can smell the sea already. There are many other examples of the Bristol Byzantine style dotted around the city, but it ends well before the turn of the twentieth century. Bristol architecture could have developed from this style, or from the uniquely complex and wilful Gothic of St Mary Redcliffe and other city-centre churches, into some form of expressionism, as did the former Hanseatic cities of northern Europe.

That they didn’t is a reminder of just how hidebound British architecture was by the early twentieth century – the trans-European routes of expressionist magazines and architectural theorists didn’t pass through the UK. Yet a further reason is that the Georgian tradition is equally strong in the city. In the twentieth century, neo-Georgian, like E. Vincent Harris’s bloodless,

vague, unresolved Council House that toothlessly accompanies Bristol Cathedral, was a safer bet. Even here there was a brief moment of originality – Charles Holden’s Bristol Central Library, built in the 1900s, takes Tudor motifs and abstracts them in the manner of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, in the process creating one of the few English equivalents to the modernity and confidence of turn-of-the-century Glasgow architecture. Yet the dozens of neo-Georgian structures that followed had none of Holden’s willingness to mutate the traditional motifs, with the courage of his own convictions. Similarly, any Gothic alternative, like the 1920s Willis Building, was almost invariably based on reproduction, not on trying to create its effects without imitation. The modernist structures that followed the war were, with exceptions mainly located away from the centre, even worse. If you want to like twentieth-century architecture, don’t come to Bristol.

Town Planning that Eats Itself

That said, anyone looking just for good buildings can easily find an enormous amount to admire in Bristol – late medieval, Regency and early industrial architecture is especially rich here, although almost always decontextualized, thrown into collision with something hostile. As ever with British cities, the result is thrilling, tiring and tawdry in roughly equal measure. As townscape, the city is all over the place, thrown together as if at random. Yet from, say, the University’s elevated point, the beauty of Bristol is inescapable – the details at ground level may often be poor, but from up above it doesn’t seem to matter. The dramatic, romantic topography – easily the most impressive of any southern city – and tight, winding streets seem to encourage a sense of chaos, so the city’s most interesting places are a matter of hills, snickets and unexpected, panoramic vistas. Often, however, you’ll step out of the bustle into a howling void. After a while exploring the city, the reasons for this start to become clear. This is a city which had plan after plan, all of them left half-finished, all of them immediately superseded, and none of them ever executed with any particular conviction. The result is mostly that what interesting



architecture there is tends to be fighting with the plans rather than emerging alongside them. One might hope this is all a working town's gesture of defiant nonconformity against the aestheticism and masterplanning of Bath, just up the road, but that would be ascribing an unlikely level of intention. And while cities such as Coventry seem ashamed of their hugely impressive achievements, Bristol appears to be quite content with the mess it made of itself. This might seem to be an aesthetic question, but the city's blindness to its failings has other, more direct consequences.

The most obvious piece of pure town planning in the city centre is the huge showpiece of Queen Square, where an architecture alternately of colonial elegance, twentieth-century pastiche and Victorian muddle is made coherent by the simple eighteenth-century layout and a delimited roofline. Amazingly, in the 1930s a road was built bisecting this square, and the 1990s removal of that, at least, was probably mourned by few. It might be an unusually gross example, but there's still something symptomatic about it. Every now and again, an attempt is made to plan Bristol, then someone tears it apart in favour of the next plan, and then the damage is patched up more or less efficiently. Although the process was well underway before Bristol was Blitzed, the largest-scale fudges are post-war. It's possible that this comes

from the city's political marginality. Though it is, along with Southampton, one of the few consistently Labour-voting areas in the South, Bristol Council has historically fluctuated. That isn't to say that Whigs and Tories can't be sponsors of decent architecture themselves, much as we might wish that to be true, but it does mean that Bristol never seems to have had the *political* cohesion of those cities that really did take themselves seriously as planned entities – one-time One-Party city states like Coventry, Sheffield, Newcastle, or even Blair-era Manchester. Local historian James Dixon described it to me as follows: a plan is embarked upon, then shelved, then either finished in radically different circumstances or abandoned in favour of a new plan. It's as if the city were replanned by several different and hostile councils all at once.

Exceptions to the abrasive rule do exist – the winding sandstone roads around the University feature some sensitive interventions, such as the tiny, clipped Barclays Bank near the Willis Building – but the stumps of several clearly uncompleted schemes lie scattered all over the place. Right in the centre, there's the Stafford Cripps Beaux Arts of Broadmead. This attempts a cohesive, stone-clad post-Blitz boulevard somewhere between modernism and classicism, in a manner familiar to anyone from Sheffield (The Moor) or Southampton (Above Bar), but it has none of the vigour that could make it convincing. At least, in its tightness and density it encourages much wan shopping, with shopping malls inserted into it more-or-less obtrusively. At one corner Broadmead suddenly meets Cabot Circus, a recent shopping centre designed by prolific retail hacks Chapman Taylor in the 'malls without walls' genre, the kind of mall you can just stroll into rather than pass an obvious threshold, although the sleight of hand is not all that sophisticated. Tastelessness aside, it's a spatially imaginative, almost futurist place, with its flying walkways and quasi-parametric tumbling glass roofs. Though in function it is twenty-first century in the most depressing sense, I'm told Cabot Circus is a long-delayed completion of the 1940s City Plan.

At the opposite extreme to the density and activity of Cabot Circus is the roundabout expanse of St James Barton, or as it is better known, 'The Bearpit'. The 'pit' refers to its sunken presence in the middle of a traffic gyratory, but no doubt also applies

as a derogatory term to the extensive street drinking that takes place here; there are no benches, only one-man seats, a draconian measure against rough sleeping. The buildings ringing the place are all different, and all awful – a bland Portland stone '50s Debenhams, a long, semi-Brutalist, semi-derelect block, a high-tech reclud, and a nondescript, confused mid-rise of 'aspirational' flats, whose owners are presumably pleased that they don't have to step over the homeless. The Bearpit is on a vast scale, but does nothing with its hugeness, is merely a sullen emptiness, existing only to encourage various kinds of 'street art'. A visit to Flickr can attest that the Bearpit's landscaping looks great from the air, like a partly eaten honeycomb surrounded by lorries. The model looked great too, no doubt.

Tucked in amongst all this are some of the most picture-postcard vistas in Britain – the classic townscape of the Christmas Steps, with its cider-tourist outposts, or the Georgiana around the imposing imperial showpiece of the Exchange. Each one of them gives abruptly out onto something chaotic, and maybe that's a good thing, stopping Bristol from becoming York or Bath; but at least this conflict could have been consciously worked with, rather than ignored. The worst impositions of all, unfortunately given the rather important nature of towers as urban landmarks, are the tall buildings – a tower given the New Labour nomenclature 'the Eclipse' is a hopeless tubular yuppiedrome, a '60s reclud Radisson is a woeful, barcode-façade attempt at a Beetham Tower, and drab blocks of the 1970s such as the dour, lurking Castlemead, are in no way better. There are so many eccentric, expressive, scraping and eldritch church spires in Bristol that there's not even the excuse of lack of precedent for tall buildings. Most of the office towers were built near the end of the post-war boom, in the early '70s, and stood empty or near-empty for a decade or more after that.

The mess of plan upon plan upon erased plan creates one great moment, though, a piece of half dirigiste, half accidental 'planning' so exquisite that it could be a whole model for how to stitch together the contemporary city. Bristolians may be alarmed to find that I am referring to Lewin's Mead, a '60s–70s redevelopment of a medieval area with walkways and towers. It is

interesting not so much for the elevations – most of these office blocks, law courts and similar bureaucratic complexes are of little individual note. It's because, if you have a good enough guide, it's the city's most rewarding *promenade architecturale*. Start off on the walkways, pass through towers, survey the views of the city's innards, then proceed along alleyways past fragments of the old city walls, slip through doorways, and spot on the way medieval churches, art nouveau printworks and expressionist adornments on contemporary nightclubs, while skyways criss-cross above you. Here, just for once, this perpetually unfinished city has made a virtue out of its heterogeneity, with the walkways and alleys providing surprising and thrilling pieces of townscape. Somehow it has all bled together into one, an inspired collage of faïence, concrete and Bath stone. It's a great improvisation, and it exists outside of all our familiar divides – masterplanning vs localism, Ville Radieuse vs Rue Corridor, it doesn't matter. Given how much of the UK is as diverse and messy as this, there's a lesson here, or several. Bristol could become the most fantastic of mazes, if it wanted to.

Sofa Riot, Tesco Riots

All this might not be the essence of Bristol's urban identity anyway – who needs architecture when you've got street art? Here I should declare my prejudice in advance – I don't think Banksy is funny. Or subversive. Or any good. The guys from *Pulp Fiction* with bananas for guns! Policemen looking silly! Rats holding up placards saying clever things! This sort of public-school japery passing for critique is as good a shorthand as any for what's wrong with the contemporary left's aesthetics, such as they are – sentimentality, in-jokes, instant punchlines. Yet, that said, the pseudonymous one's redecorations of Bristol façades at least have a political point to make of some description, however obvious. Mostly, what you find just outside the centre are areas daubed in day-glo inanities of various sorts, as relentlessly bright and jolly as a bumpiously clad façade, though with more counter-cultural pretensions.

You reach Stokes Croft very abruptly after the Bearpit, and



the change is sudden indeed – from no graffiti to graffiti everywhere, from no hipsters to only hipsters. It is the territory of Bristol counterculture, its fiefdom, its reservation. This isn't entirely a bad thing – it is always nice to see so many bicycles, and so many young people enjoying themselves. Artists such as the tellingly-named Sweet Toof have a successful line here in big pink monsters, updatings of '50s comic books daubed across the façades of Regency terraces, Bristol Byzantine warehouses, '60s office blocks, whatever is either derelict or alternative long enough to attract it or not to be able to clean it off. One especially hulking block has been tagged with a typical selection – an alien, with big pink gums; a stylized crocodile along a smashed-in window; 'AGAINST STATE REPRESSION'. It all congeals into a soup of meaningless gestures. However, there is a point being made in Stokes Croft too, or at least there was on the day I was walking around it. One of those brightly coloured graf creatures is wielding a megaphone and a placard, that informs us that 93 per cent oppose a Tesco in their area. 'THINK LOCAL. Our Council Must Listen', he shouts, in serified capitals, above a shop selling gobsmackingly expensive handmade furniture. The shop is called 'Sofa Riot'.

The choice between Sofa Riot and Tesco is, needless to say, a false one, but symptomatic nonetheless. Cottage industry, as ever just a tad pleased with itself, versus hyper-advanced, ultra-capitalist post-Fordist industry, is not entirely a real contest. Nor are they usually in any particular conflict. As the likes of Richard Florida have been tireless in reminding policymakers, these kinds of boutique ventures can make an area safe for total colonization by neoliberalism perhaps better than any other. Meanwhile the mass production, automation and distribution of a Tesco does, for all the grim un-unionized labour and destructive ecological practices, suggest possible solutions to the problem of feeding several billion people. Sofa Riot and Tesco are complements to each other, different approaches to the same problem – that of expanding speculation and profit to areas that had previously – like Stokes Croft – been subject to post-industrial decline. However, a month or so after I left Bristol, something very unusual occurred. When the Tesco finally emerged, a full-scale riot broke out. Not a riot as in a few windows smashed and the odd rock thrown, but a riot as in several policemen seriously injured. Young working-class Bristolians from nearby St Paul's joined in the melee, suggesting, like the student protests a few months before, that evanescent thing – a real alliance between green/sustainability/etc activists and the poor they occasionally like to speak for. What would this develop into, happening as it did just outside of Sofa Riot?

As with most areas of its kind, the bohemian scene in Stokes Croft takes place mostly in pre-war buildings that went to seed before being bought up by speculators or squatted in, if got to in time; its council estates feel a little separate. Round the corner from Sofa Riot, facing subdivided Victorian houses as tall and austere as Glasgow tenements, are the impressive interlinked towers of Dove Street Flats. Regardless of the planning hashes, Bristol's City Architects evidently had at least some talent, as these are clipped, sharp, if unoriginal designs, connected by glass walkways and, from the looks of them, recently painted and renovated. As a middle-aged resident walks in, we muse of these hilltop monoliths that 'the views must be amazing'. 'Oh, they are,' he replies. 'But they're so bloody cold inside that I'm actually warmer out here than in there. I'd die to get out of 'em'.

There were, after the immediate sprouting of towers, attempts to rehouse Bristol that were less a hostage to the climate. Identical towers to those on Dove Street were proposed for another hilltop site near the University; after protests and counter-proposals, they were replaced with High Kingsdown, a low-rise scheme which shuns the site's loftiness, designed by Whicheloe Macfarlane and JT Group in 1971. Happily, here the reaction against monolithic planning led to an imaginative, complex arrangement of cubistic stock-brick houses rather than a mere pastiche of what was there before. The influence of Scandinavian housing estates and the middle-class utopias of Eric Lyons are both visible. The scheme manages to be very dense and very modern, and at the same time preserves the sacred house-with-a-garden, squaring a few circles along the way, though the pub in the middle which the whole scheme circles around is derelict. High Kingsdown's laid-back Swedish politesse fits the sleepy city very well, as does its labyrinthine arrangement, but, as so often, it just wasn't literal enough, too implicit and too arty in its evocation of vernacular urbanism. Plenty of mock-Victoriana would follow in the surrounding area, in a reaction against even this tamed, sensitive modernism. One Thatcher-era villa nearby features a Victorian-style roundel showing its builders as bewhiskered nineteenth-century notables.

Where Did All the Dockers Go?

There is one very strange thing about Bristol, and it may help explain why it is that the city manages to appear relatively independent of London, and how the city survived after the docks left the city centre. If you've walked around great port cities such as Liverpool, Newcastle, Salford, East London, Southampton, you know that the docks have either disappeared or employ a mere handful of people, and you know that most of those who were once dockers are retired or drawing the dole. And yet you feel that you're in a working-class city, and it feels like those dockers are still around, as are their children and grandchildren. This feeling is completely absent from Bristol. Were it not for all that water, you'd think you were in a particularly big and rough-edged University town or Cathedral City, rather than a place that

was built around its docks. Bristol is a famously multicultural city whose centre is strikingly white, and it's also a working-class city whose centre is strikingly bourgeois and affluent. The clue to how this happened must be found at the docks themselves.

The city docks closed to industry as late as 1991, well after inner Liverpool or London, but moving like them downriver, to Avonmouth, a typical exurban container port, so that we don't have to worry about where things come from any more. Accordingly, the site of the Floating Harbour, an engineering marvel in its day, was up for grabs. Mostly, Bristol can be criticized for not hiring architects of any talent or significance; here that doesn't apply, and yet the results are every bit as unimpressive as the run of the mill in the rest of Bristol. On a boat tour along 'Harbourside', as it is branded, you can find entirely nondescript places that turn out to have major architectural pedigree. In the middle of Harbourside is a thing called @Bristol, a drab and muddled interactive entertainment centre, a coldly utilitarian structure, dressed with some particularly vacuous public art – a big steel ball, a phallic spine that lights up in different colours at night. On the other side of the water is a housing scheme by Fielden Clegg Bradley, responsible for well-designed and well-made work in Cambridge and elsewhere; yet this is the cheapest of the cheap, dense blocks with brightly coloured cladding and taped-on metal balconies. Much of it is under scaffolding the second time I visit, as the extraneous bits had started to fall off – a process that is already starting to overtake many of the showpieces of the New Labour era. Further downriver from that is the largest of the housing schemes, a distressingly poor work by the usually reliable Edward Cullinan, with no trace of that firm's usual originality and drama, indistinguishable from the work of the usual regen grunts. The worst moment is surely the swoopy-roofed pavilion in the middle of it – an axis was to be created with the Cathedral, but then this was placed within it, as if to take the piss. More and more and less and less worthy blocks clog up the harbour from here on, occasionally interspersed with the brightly painted terraces of an earlier era, which look very probably to have set the whole process in motion; some boatbuilders cling on just in front of them. In the far distance are absolutely vast tobacco warehouses, as thuggishly

robust as everything else is tackily jerry-built. Apparently they're very hard to convert into flats.

If you got off the boat here and walked to Spike Island, you'd start to find a much more compelling landscape, of ordinary working-class terraces and towers interspersed with very weird things – iron-balconied Georgiana evoking New Orleans, iron bridges and Bristol Byzantine warehouses awaiting their regeneration. There's a workaday place here that still has some traces of its former life, and it's very worthwhile. We'll stay on the Floating Harbour, though, to see what we can see. After passing past the pedestrianized main drag of Harbourside, where low-rise '50s sheds are filled with, and more recently not filled with, bars, cafés and clubs, the boat starts to pass several very large red-brick buildings, cleaving tightly to the water, seldom allowing pedestrian access. They're typical slabs of 1980s–90s postmodernism, crude and overbearing efforts to 'humanize' the office block via classical or Gothic references, usually of the most shallow kind. You can find buildings exactly like these in central Reading, or you can find them in any business park built before around 1999, and sometimes after. As to what they're doing in Bristol docks, the answer lies in the way that the place was designated an Enterprise Zone in the 1980s, as a response to the riots of 1980–81. The Bristol Development Corporation's work was a typical Thatcher-era state-funded attempt to court private business, via tax incentives and the suspension of planning regulations. It led inexorably to these huge brick complexes for now-publicly owned banks. Presumably the odd rioter might have ended up getting a job as a cleaner in some of these. The occasional pre-80s structure pokes out – regenerated warehouses, or the dashing '60s Shot Tower, an exception to the rule of Bristol's post-war mediocrity. There is also an exception to the contemporary mediocrity, in the form of a good, blocky steel bridge and a precise glass tower by Glenn Howells – but the stretch is, on the whole, very depressing indeed.

Get off the boat near Temple Meads and you can walk through a bustling, organic, fair-trade world that is seemingly recession-proof, before you arrive at the business park interzone by the station. In amongst the pubs, cafés and restaurants you'll



find the headquarters of the Transport and General Workers Union. A Portland stone and brick piece of 1950s austerity near-modernism, it features a Socialist Realist relief sculpture – three naked men with rippling muscles hold aloft a torch, a Spartan dignity of labour. The building is, of course, derelict, as empty and bizarre a remnant in the contemporary cityscape as the ideas of working-class power that brought it into being. Evidently two forces worked in tandem to create the new Bristol – the startlingly affluent, albeit shabby, centre we see today. Those lovely painted terraces and vile pomo offices both brought the middle classes back to the city centre, long before this started to happen in Manchester, Birmingham and elsewhere; even the waterside location was prescient, as was the easy proximity to the capital by train and motorway. Like the Docks themselves, the dockers and their families just disappeared from sight, into some Outer Avon backlands. The riots of 2011 coincided with another unplanned, tax-free Enterprise Zone, currently planned for the derelict industrial strip alongside Temple Meads station. Doomed to repeat.



Chapter Seven

Brighton and Hove: On Parade

A Creative Class Hero Is Something to Be

It could be said, albeit slightly hyperbolically, that we are all Brightonians now – or at least our governments and local councils would really rather we were. The seaside city of Brighton and Hove is a place with a radically immaterial economy of tourism, property, media and ‘creativity’, a city of leisure. The industries are the creative industry, and the far bigger service industry it rests on. Unlike, say, Creative Class ideologists’ other favourite British city, Manchester, it has no industrial past to uncomfortably erase; but the likeness should not be understated. Like the cities that would desperately wish to emulate it, this city (a status fairly recently awarded) has a large and ignored working-class population, often living in large and slightly-less-easily ignored tower blocks. Brighton and Hove were built in the early nineteenth century for fashionable London on holiday, and this is very much what it feels like in the twenty-first century, at least after a twentieth-century ‘decline’ when it became more proletarian. In short, there’s a lot to get annoyed by. The problem, however, with maintaining a critique of the place is that it is often so gorgeous that it’s almost impossible to keep your faculties about you. In an analogous but visually very different way to Milton Keynes, Brighton is the most seductive city of the new economy. It implicitly suggests that for such an economy to work, a place needs to be outside the workaday routine in a very literal way.

But Brighton is also the first city to elect a Green MP, Caroline

Lucas. It would be churlish and sectarian for anyone on the left to object to this: as a parliamentarian, Lucas has proved herself far more of a Social Democrat – hell, far more of an *Opposition* – than practically anyone in the Labour Party. However, my local sources claim that the Green victory in Brighton – where they also have partial control over the council – was based on a direct appeal to the local middle class, their canvassers completely bypassing a disenfranchised but residually Labour population in the local council estates. Whether that is true or not, the oft-quoted fact that the Green Party boasts a higher average income per member than any other political party does tend to speak for itself. On the municipal level, then, Green Brighton can seem superficial, even exclusive. There's an example in architectural terms right by the station: a development that harmoniously unites right and left Brighton, if we're being extraordinarily generous. This is the grandiosely named New England Quarter, a piece of brownfield regen on the site of a former railway works. In design terms, it's fundamentally indistinguishable from any other up and down the country. Much of it is in the anonymous, render/wood/metal balconies style, with the latter amusingly skimpy, implying some very svelte occupants; the central tower, Feilden Clegg Bradley's 'One Brighton', has a marginally clearer, more convincing presence. The difference is in the marketing. At one corner is something calling itself 'Brighton Junction – an *ethical* property centre'. That's their italics, and their protesting too much. Ethics in the development are expressed through underground car parks hidden under Sainsbury's, Subway and the 'public realm' – and some extensive gating. Glowering 4 x 4s barge their way down the surrounding roads. Then you come to one of the city's many council tower blocks, a thin, stock-brick thing with, unforgivably, an expressed, concrete car park on its ground floor. You can drive, by all means, but be *discreet*.

From here you can walk through the North Laines, whose gaily painted shopfronts are a centre of the city's alternative culture, with some undeniably rather intriguing outlets among all the bizarrely persistent Carnaby Street nostalgia, which is best signified by the prominent sign 'Madcap Items £20'. North Laine's hip-bourgeois nature has recently been accompanied

by something more square-bourgeois – Bennetts’ new Jubilee Library, and the several blocks around it. The Library itself is a surprisingly confident building, especially for a PFI and Design and Build contract, something which usually guarantees shoddiness. Its elegance is almost entirely down to neat proportions and the decision to clad much of it in deep blue glazed tiles, a subtle nod to one of the city’s Victorian materials, which fits the general raffishness very nicely. Somewhat less successful is the obligatory thwacking big atrium, which is visible through a blue glass façade soiled by the city’s anti-social seagulls. The blocks around, housing the usual middle-class chains – Wagamama, etc – are inoffensive, if bland, so it’s the offsetting that offends: the notion that a library must be justified by lots of surrounding retail, something that long pre-dates the current war on the public sector. The entrance to PizzaExpress is far more prominent than that of the Library itself.

Fashionable Brighton is not nearly as interesting as it thinks it is. In fact, the element of the city that really convinces, that saves it from completely irredeemable smugness, is the tourists’ seafront promenade, and the dense fringe of grandiose houses and apartments along it. One route takes you past irksome retail, old (the twee maze of The Lanes, where it is acceptable to call a shop ‘Pretty Eccentric’) and new (CZWG’s Black Lion Street, a rather imaginative, angular infill building which unfortunately houses a Jamie Oliver restaurant). Then you get to this sweeping vista, somewhere between a Regency utopia and a Brutalist Miami, defined most magnificently by a feeling of space and air without parallel in the UK, with a wide boulevard, open lawns, and the Channel spread out before you. It’s glorious, and that glory is given particular pathos by the ruins of the West Pier, a haunting reminder of the city’s persistent hint of the sinister. Giant towers are planned and seemingly shelved at each end of this imposing ensemble – a monster hotel by Wilkinson Eyre to the west, an observation tower by Marks Barfield to the east. The latter was supposed to replace the ruins of the West Pier with a huge, 1960s TV Tower-like contraption. No construction can be seen, but the hoardings promising various delights are still there, now considerably worn.

The Apotheosis of the Luxury Flat

Celebrity architectural scribbler Frank Gehry had a scheme in the Planning Department at Hove for some years during the boom. It entailed one small architectural element by the man himself, twisty and aluminium-clad to make sure you knew who it was; that was then hemmed in, to make it profitable, by several very dense and very bland blocks of luxury flats. It is now not so much shelved as permanently cancelled, although that's no great tragedy, as the scheme bore about as much relation to Gehry's best work as Walter Gropius's Playboy Club in Park Lane did to the Dessau Bauhaus. As it is, modernism in the centre of Brighton is represented by some still controversial structures. One scheme surely due some critical rehabilitation is the Brighton Centre and the accompanying Odeon, designed by Russell Diplock Associates. Both sit at the point where Brutalism and futurist kitsch meet, and are all the better for it, with the Odeon's expressionistic roofline a particular thrill. Even more hated by custodians of Brighton are the several Richard Seifert schemes that crowd behind Alfred Waterhouse's aggressively red, late-Victorian Hotel Metropole and the fussy redesign that the IRA inadvertently facilitated for the Grand. There is one unforgivable element to this complex, where Seifert's additions extend to sawing off Waterhouse's skyline, replacing it in the clumsiest, lamest manner possible with flat extra floors – but the irregular grids of the Seifert towers themselves are very smart, both up close and from a distance, adding a metropolitan skyline drama which, along with the council high-rises in the east of the city, stops the townscape from becoming a mildly more boho seaside version of Bath.

The other major modernist scheme creates a demarcation between Brighton and Hove, both in terms of scale and style, but it's of far more than local significance. Wells Coates's 1936 Embassy Court, recently and thoroughly restored, follows on the experiments of his Isokon housing block in London. The latter, a small development in Hampstead, was an attempt to recreate Central European Modernist communal living, largely inhabited by Weimar exiles. Embassy Court expands the concept

into a huge, physically powerful block. It might have been built as serviced flats for light entertainers, but it's clear here how much Coates was indebted to Constructivism, especially Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow. The seaside front is clean, curved and classic, but prowl round the corner and the building's circulation is on spectacular display, with strongly, bulgingly modelled access decks and staircases, rendered in thick cream, so lush that you feel you could eat them – it supports Manfredo Tafuri's one-time description of Coates as a 'proto-Brutalist'. While chromatically it is of a piece with Regency Hove, the architectural ideas are entirely those of far-left inter-war Europe; as apparently are too the very small *existenzminimum* proportions of the flats inside. What was originally intended as an imagine-no-possession gesture is reimagined as the no-frills bed for the night of a seedy seaside assignation. In the combination of metropolitanism, grand architectural ambitions and general seediness, Embassy Court is all the best things about Brighton and Hove in one concrete structure. It's one of the most remarkable blocks of flats in the country, among several more prosaic apartment blocks of the same era in Hove.

First you pass through Brunswick Town, which is as complete an expression of Regency luxury aesthetics as Embassy Court is of the '30s, an often breathtaking collection of crescents and squares. Looking at the way the bow-windowed terraces sweep down the hills to the sea, it's hard not to sense that here there was a real seriousness about high-design, high-density living combining with hierarchy, profit-making and speculation. It is what William Cobbett would have considered an emanation of the Wen, an export of London into the Sussex countryside (then just a stroll away), overbearing, prissy, pretentiously modish. In the urban island that we live in now, rather than the rural one Cobbett saw destroyed, it is utterly exemplary. Brunswick Town and its related developments were evidently the Urban Renaissance of their day, and they were certainly as shabby – the classical façades are a mere front, with seediness always strongly visible round the back. The difference between these and the speculations two centuries thence is that these are immeasurably more confident and proud in architectonic execution. Looking at the central crescents



of the development, spiralling wildly uphill, they seem more modern than ever – the dozens of bays are as rhythmic and repetitive as anything designed in the 1960s. What they make clear is just how seriously these designers, stock-jobbers and speculators took the architectural problem of building metropolitan architecture at a very high density and on a very large scale. They didn't get round it by offsetting the mass with gestures of irregularity, instead they accentuated it, with a dominant rationalist sweep that encompasses rather than differentiates. The result, in a city of self-proclaimed individualists, is that it feels as much a piece of deferred collective housing as does Embassy Court.

Go up the hill a bit from here, and you find much more of this luxury high-density housing, all of it exceptionally seductive. Bethnal Green was once described as a living museum of working-class housing. If so, then Hove is a living museum of the luxury flat. Every permutation is on show. The Jeeves and Wooster neo-Georgian of Wick Hall, now a Buddhist Centre ('Meditate in Brighton', it suggests – a new, more pious approach to self-help); the Crittall Windows and wave motifs of Furze Court, with additional Bupa centre. Eric Lyons's typically elegant Span Development at Park Gate. Gwydyr Mansions, a neo-Flemish

tenement block which, at the back, shows a weird conjunction of rectitude (neatly Georgian windows) and accidental modernism (stark concrete access balconies). At St Anne's Court and Beresford Court, there are especially outré combinations of traditionalism and '30s metropolitan display, where odd Byzantine turrets, Tudor timbering and Georgian brickwork meet De Stijl doorways and futurist-styled stained glass. St Anne's Court has a blue plaque informing us that Lord Alfred Douglas once lived here.

The newer blocks of flats make exactly the same move, on exactly the same low-to-mid-rise scale, for exactly the same kind of clientele – Hove's sleepy and/or elderly population, and the usual trickle of ex-Londoners – but are glaringly clumsy and poorly executed by comparison. Take Landsdowne Court, with its blocky red terracotta cladding and strikingly cheap-looking balconies – it could be in any number of less favoured, less wealthy towns. The blocks next to Beresford Court are especially alarming – here, perhaps as some consequence of the salty winds coming in off the sea, the wood panelling has deteriorated so rapidly that it looks burnt. In fact, it looks like the boarding councils use to deter squatting. It's all indicative of one of the stranger things for which the last thirty years can be indicted – that so often, even the luxury housing was poor. It seems to sum up a few truths about this attractive if impressively hypocritical city. At least from the elevated points of Hove you can walk down to the seafront, take in those winds and that space, and pretend that everything's going to be alright.

Genteel Brutalism

If you take another approach to Hove, the effect is quite different from Brunswick Town's showpiece drama. If you walk along the seafront, well into Hove's less populous, less festive half of the water, then you suddenly find the line of grand hotels being broken by several immense blocks of modern flats. This is Grand Avenue, named in an earlier era. If this were practically anywhere else in the country, save perhaps for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, a place looking like Grand Avenue

would be branded a sink estate, the brick would be discoloured and the concrete would be cancerous, and it would be either massively overcrowded or recently ‘decanted’. Here, it appears that the metropolitan quiet and high-density isolation of high-rise living signifies luxury. I don’t exaggerate. On the west side are the three identical, serried blocks of Warnham Court, concrete with brick infill, a completely generic 1960s design, where the major difference is partly one of clientele, partly one of density, as they don’t even have the surrounding greenery that usually accompanies blocks of this sort in a real council estate. The biggest of them all, the overbearingly bulky Coombe Lea, would surely be considered a horror block, an eyesore, anywhere but a place this genteel. For all that, the look of cheapness should not be overstated; they’re really no more or less cheap or jerry-built than the terracotta guest houses whose space they barge into. On the other side of the central reservation, the blocks have more pretensions – art deco mouldings, expressive balconies, nice moderne typography, a hint of Brightons past and the skulduggery that may have taken place in them. This little cluster of high-rise, high-density modernism is centred around a statue of Queen Victoria, which can’t help but feel apt.

Walk a little further on from here, past some lost Arts and Crafts semis and rather more decorative tenements, and you get to Hove Town Hall, a wild-eyed vindication of 1960s modernity in the most unlikely place. Designed by Wells-Thorpe and Partners in 1970, it is not a building that is remotely interested in keeping up appearances. Put together in a decade when there were serious thoughts about demolishing large swathes of Regency Brighton and Hove, and when skyscrapers started appearing just behind the Grand Hotels, it abandons any thought of contiguous urbanism with its Victorian surroundings in favour of a supreme, isolated and grandiose object-building. As a piece of architecture it is a monstrously successful achievement; it doesn’t need a context, it creates its own. The houses and flats around are forced to pay tribute. Yet it doesn’t register its centrality through height, but through compaction.

The complex is asymmetrically arranged, with a corner clock tower and wings, detailed in a thickly ribbed grey concrete,

mostly kept in very good condition. There is a lot of glass, but not in the contemporary ‘transparent’ manner – quite the reverse, in fact, with the material smoked into a mean, moody nicotine brown, with every Sussex bureaucrat able to play at starring in *All The President’s Men*. Each floor is slightly boxed-out, so that the complex appears as several intersecting black and grey ziggurats. The interiors, also, have a compulsive, Cold War intensity, with expensive materials and sharply modern patterns running through the ceremonial spaces. At one corner, Hove’s coat of arms is embossed into the concrete, meticulously detailed in red, blue and shimmering gold mosaic. The service areas round the back, with their glass walkways and deep concrete curves, are worth a wander just in themselves. The only persistent question is: how on earth did this get built here, by these people? When and how did post-war Conservative councillors in Sussex seaside towns acquire a taste for the avant-garde? The question loses some of its edge when one remembers that the Tory Party of Edward Heath was practically the SWP by contemporary standards, but the point remains. Were they just hoodwinked by clever architects, or was Brighton and Hove seriously trying to become the seaside town of the future?

The Seedy Side

If so, they were quickly defeated by conservationists, particularly after the ‘damage’ done to the seaside skyline by the council towers in the east and Seifert’s cluster round the Hotel Metropole. Obviously on some level this was all to the good – no amount of Hove Town Halls could justify the demolition of Brunswick Town – but conservationism does sound like conservatism for more than aural reasons. In a recent and very informative architectural guide to Brighton and Hove, it is claimed that the siting of Brighton’s more, shall we say, *demotic* seaside attractions on the ‘usefully remote’ main pier has the effect of not lowering the tone too much, of keeping all that flashy prole spectacle at a safe distance from the raffish and delicate promenade frontage. Aside from the objectionable tone of such a description, this is very much how the Pier relates to the rest of the city; a reservation of

the sort of tackiness you'd usually go to Southend, Bournemouth or Blackpool to experience. For these reasons it is worth visiting, although not just for these reasons.

If I describe Brighton sneeringly, that is not at all the intention, more something that creeps in almost against my will – an inability not to be a little chippy about the place, along with a reluctance to condemn it entirely. In my early twenties, I knew this place better than anywhere but London and my home town, and always had very conflicted feelings about it. I come from the south coast's largest city (it's nice to find a superlative for it), thirty or so miles westwards, a working city with none of the urbane sophistication of Brighton and Hove, although of a similar size and in a similar part of the country. Coming from such a place, Brighton was both fascinating and irritating – irritating because it seemed to have absolutely no idea of just how bloody lucky it was. Everybody I knew in Brighton was in a band. Every last one of them. Some weren't when I met them, but they soon succumbed. Some of those bands went on to have the odd NME cover, some of them are Big in Japan, some just played a handful of gigs, but the point wasn't whether they were good or not. The point was that they all appeared to think it was completely natural and normal that they would spend their lives writing songs, recording, and continually bumping into each other outside the Komedia or in the awe-inspiring antiquarian hangar of Snooper's Paradise in North Laine; and yet they seldom ran out of money. This, for them, was just the way things were; the creative class are not much better at thinking outside their circumstances than any other section of the bourgeoisie. For me, pop culture was something transformative, unexpected – the sheer strangeness of finding the hyper-intellectual, wildly pretentious world of the music press in your local Spar was a door to another world, whereas for them it was something familiar to the point of being boring. The non-musical aspects were of no import. The songs speak for themselves. The music's the thing. I found all that hard to forgive, although the tide of history was evidently with them. My younger brother, seduced in his own way, went as far as moving here, and within months despised the place with a passion. 'Fucking Toytown', was his neatest way of describing his problem with



it. But seductive is really exactly what it is – a quick visit to Snooper’s Paradise brings it all back with great intensity. A stall full of ‘60s New Left paperbacks, Raymond Williams, Wilhelm Reich and Stokely Carmichael; racks upon racks of brightly coloured artificial fabrics, giving your fingers a static electric tingle; box after box of worn, pungent vinyl; the SF-boy manna of an entire Dr Who section. Only the smell of the industrial-strength hydroponics is absent.

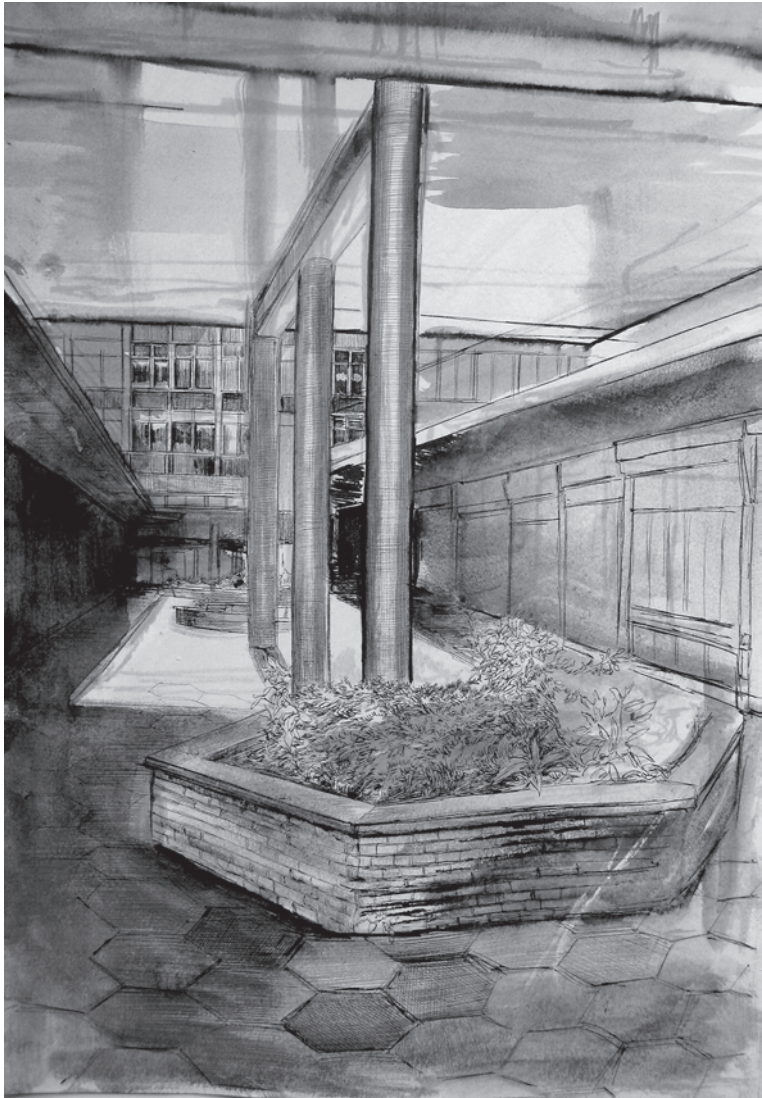
The significance of the above is that I found myself inadvertently retracing my way to the house in Kemptown where I used to outstay the welcome of a friend’s parents. It is, coincidentally, a great route for watching elegant Brighton decompose in a short space and time. Walk north and east from the Pier, past the only new church in this book (almost amusingly bad, a poky little addition to the ground floor of a shoddy block of flats), and you arrive at the big bad Brighton tower blocks. Some of them really are impressive in their out-of-scale pride and confidence, their dimensions overwhelming smaller neighbours. But this is still Brighton, and so those neighbours are often so strange as to make the juxtaposition a genuinely surrealist one; a little toy castle lurks alongside twenty storeys, doubled around a glass stair tower, in black and brown concrete. Further uphill, you find half-timbered

Edwardian townhouses overlooked by serried stock-brick blocks, and these must command views so magnificent that, a generation or two after lifelong council-house tenure is abolished, they will surely be a preserve of the exceedingly rich. At the corner of the street is what looks like a cross between a bunker and the Rhino House at London Zoo, its concrete moulded in subtle, shallow curves. In the places where Brighton stops being affluent, it doesn't stop being Brighton, and that is one of the better things about the city.

That said, at this distance I can't possibly understand why such enthusiasts for mind-altering substances as those I knew in Brighton were so seldom attracted to the Pier. Ideally, Brighton Pier needs to be visited at night, for the full psychotropic effect of its neon pulsations to be experienced. At first, as you enter, it's a fairly normal bit of kiss-me-quick neo-Victoriana, with nostalgic iconography highlighting the strange fact that at the seaside, there are only two real eras of significance – a prurient, repressed Victorian age, and a prurient, repressed 1950s. That's not why you should come here if you're interested in architecture. The reason why is the dodgems, which has a space frame roof trimmed in pink and purple tubes of neon. Or the Waltzer,



where a yellow-orange-red sunburst sits atop the metal construction holding up the tilted cars. Or 'Scream', of which the caption says 'It's Extreme'. Or the Crazy Mouse, a children's board game reproduced in three dimensions and built twenty feet high. I'm not suggesting that you actually go on any of these rides, unless you want to. Instead, more of a question: who dares deny that in the crackling electricity of all this, its current of vivid pleasure, there's something far more urban and metropolitan than the most well-appointed of Regency Crescents? And something more *other* than the self-conscious 'alternative'?



Chapter Eight

Croydon: Zone 5 Strategy

Super-Dormitory

After the collapse of the Urban Renaissance, the suburbs are back, that much is clear. That preceded the election of the Tory–Whig government. Boris Johnson’s ‘Zone 5 Strategy’ proved again how successful a politician can be by appealing to the Free-Born Englishman’s age-old right to drive at four miles an hour rather than taking a bus, and since then the Party of government has explicitly favoured suburban, South East England, especially as the North becomes more hostile to it. Croydon, as the largest single area in Surrey and the largest Outer London borough, may be regarded as a fairly representative slice of the London/Home Counties grey area that has been a Conservative bastion for over a century, and that effectively governs the UK. It can serve here, in theory, as a typical exemplar of Home Counties Suburbia, in the same place as, say, Guildford, Woking, Watford, High Wycombe; areas designed as dormitories for City clerks, that have flourished to the point where they generate their own inward pull, and then their own peripherally located business parks, malls and factories. But why is it, then, that the first impression a stranger might have of central Croydon is that of a teeming, multicultural, independent provincial city? Why does the London Borough of Croydon so much want to be a City itself? And what can we learn about what a ‘suburb’ really is from this place?

Croydon regularly bids to receive the official title of ‘City’, and if it ever gets to fulfil its long-stated wish to drop the ‘sub’

from its 'urban', this quintessential commuter suburb will become a city of above average size, with roughly the extent and population of, say, Coventry or Hull. Croydon already has its own rapid transport system and its own rather particular pattern of urbanism, ahead of several official British cities. Many in South East England will be familiar with the strange sight that hits you when leaving East Croydon station. What with the trams and high-rises, you could believe you were in a wealthy West German industrial city – somewhere that is entirely confident about its own modernity, that willingly inhabited the late twentieth century without looking over its shoulder. The trams, too, are an unexpected joy, taking you from New Addington to Wimbledon, should you require such a service, while threading their lines above eye level. The contrast with both the average London suburb and the average English city is sharp indeed, until you walk around a little. Then the landscape starts to become familiar, and fast.

What you find on investigation is that Croydon is very English indeed: a result of the subjugation of planning to commerce. In short, in the 1960s an ambitious council offered businesses cheap office space, close to London, if they would fund infrastructural improvements. Within an astonishingly short time, a burb was transformed into a minor metropolis of skyscrapers, underpasses and flyovers; the trams would come rather later, but have a similarly metropolitan air. Since then the place has been the butt of numerous jokes. 'Mini-Manhattan', as if trying to be like New York was somehow less interesting than being like Surbiton. Croydon had, and has, ideas above its station, and for that it's hard not to warm to it. Yet the problem with the place quite quickly becomes apparent. The dashing appearance from a distance gives way to a messy, chaotic reality, contrived in the good old, ad hoc, throw-everything-in-the-air-and-see-where-it-lands style so beloved of England.

Mini-Manhattan Revisited

In its ethos, the erstwhile Croydon of the Future resembles the Enterprise Zones of the 1980s. The towers are constructed at random, oblivious to one another, allowed to go as high in any



place as the developers wanted. For that, it is hardly a paragon of social democratic urbanism, but in aesthetic it's a 1960s living museum, left remarkably intact. A complete post-war skyline, accompanied only by a mere couple of recludings, and only two completed post-1970s towers – an office block and an apartment block. Neither of these is of the slightest architectural note, though skyscrapers by Norman Foster and Make were planned before the crash, and a barcode façade can slowly be seen creeping up a concrete core near West Croydon station. As it stands, much of what you can see is mosaic, concrete and glass in the English corporate modernist manner. Accordingly, central Croydon has an accidental uniqueness: things obliterated elsewhere persist here. It's strictly for the enthusiast – there's a lot of period charm and plenty of places where you can re-enact your own personal kitchen-sink film, but not much in terms of real architectural quality. Richard Seifert's fabulous hexagonal NLA Tower, probably that firm's finest essay in tectonic corporate branding, along with Centre Point and NatWest, is justifiably regarded as Mini-Manhattan's Empire State, the block that features on the promotional literature. It was recently repainted and restored, but there's little else that shows any spark. The pleasure instead is in seeing the recent past's generic, everyday architecture in an unusual state of completeness and survival.

A walk around this suburban metropolis would take in the once chic, now shabby tapering tower the council built for their own offices, which nicely complements their earlier, enjoyably debased Victorian halls; a couple of sub-Seifert cubist experiments; a jollily Festival of Britain Travelodge in brick and zigzag render; Hilberseimer-style Zeilenbau blocks stepping along in enfilade wherever a developer could get a big enough plot; and in the distance, the chimneys of a disused power station ornamenting a giant IKEA. The problem, or for the dedicated flâneur, the fun, is in how it interacts with the suburb all around, or rather how it doesn't. Arrangements are totally random – a row of artisans' terraces with skyscrapers behind, would-be secluded Tudorbethan facing giant high-rises, the sound of birdsong vying with an endless rumble of traffic. Sometimes the place seems to be mocking itself, as when a churchyard meets a concrete subway you find the sign: 'OLD TOWN CONSERVATION AREA'. In fact, there's a lot of pre-Victorian, never mind pre-1960s remnants in among the towers, if you know where to find them – vestiges of Croydon's unlikely former existence as a religious centre. The Victorian buildings suggest a place that already considered itself a cut above the average suburb – large-scale department stores that belie the ability to get to Selfridges in twenty-five minutes from East Croydon station.

In its sense of chaos and drama, Croydon seems to have rather little in common with the typology of the commuter dormitory, but appears instead as a slice of Inner London on the lam. One of the more thrilling, and telling, moments is at the back-end of the mini-metropolis, where the office-block landscape suddenly meets market stalls, butchers' shops and catts, while a black steel walkway stretches across to connect it to a block of yuppie flats. In that tension is encapsulated what makes central Croydon feel as much a part of London proper as Peckham or Tottenham, albeit much more distant from the centre. The accidental ensemble creates an acutely surreal urban experience, taking the capital's pre-existing aptitude for juxtaposition and amplifying it. The most memorable part of it all, comfordingly but atypically, is an enclave of public space, the St George's Walk arcade, which emerges from behind the drab Nestlé Tower. Part

is open to the air, part is shell-roofed, with the rest propped up by mosaic-clad pilotis. It's elegant, but it doesn't manage to meaningfully connect with anything else. The place is divided and carved up, very literally. A walk from East Croydon to West Croydon railway stations initially takes you through a Business Improvement District, one of those privately owned, privately patrolled 'solutions' for urban management – which in this case means clean streets and a large quantity of CCTV cameras. It ends remarkably suddenly, just by West Croydon station, where dirt, rubbish and relatively 'unsightly' hoardings and shop signs take over, and the mood is fractious. Waiting for a bus here provides a front-line seat for crisis, with vicious arguments between shoppers seemingly treated as normal.

'Oi, Cleanshirt!'

The residential Croydon that lies outside the Business Improvement District is somewhat uncharted. Near the NLA tower is some very low-density, lush suburbia, much of it turned into consultancies, dentists' offices and other commercial uses. One large Arts and Crafts house in the shadow of the skyscrapers purports to be the Croydon and Bromley School of Philosophy, which charges for courses in 'practical philosophy'. A rare new tower, a metal-clad tube of zero merit, is just adjacent. Residential towers are massively outnumbered by the offices nearby, but there's some worth noting. The council estates that lurk just past the flyover have a couple of surprises, such as the Festival of Britain stylings of the Cromwell Tower, as worn and unclad as the centre's office blocks. The most notable block, however, is Zodiac House, which fans of the sitcom *Peep Show* will be familiar with. It's an enjoyable piece of 1960s kitsch, with bronze zodiac signs placed upon the ground-floor podium, which houses mostly shops that evidently went to seed a very long time ago; the flats above are well-detailed in concrete and brick, with very large windows, and look rather chic, despite the mess all around. It is apt enough as a location, given that *Peep Show* has been one of the few programmes on television in recent years to dare look twenty-first-century London in the eye, with its grim office

jobs, its class divisions, its trust-funded layabouts, its compulsory business bullshit, its air of suppressed hopelessness covered with desperate hedonism. With the possible exception of the trust funds, all of these seem present and correct here.

So Croydon seems, at first, nothing like the kempt and leafy commuter enclave that a suburb is supposed to be. First it's a Rhineland industrial-administrative city, then an inner-London muddle. But look for the housing built at the same time as the new metropolis, and you find that a utopian Southern California was more the model than Düsseldorf or Acton. The Park Hill estate (no relation to its Sheffield namesake) is a particularly remarkable case in point. Planned by Wates, one of the largest commercial volume housebuilders in an era when even they occasionally had pretensions to 'good design', this is one of the leafiest, most luxuriant of suburbs, with either bland little detached houses or vaguely Eric Lyons terraces in amongst mature trees giving way to, extraordinarily, St Bernard's: a secluded 1971 estate of three short terraces by then-famous Swiss high-art architects Atelier 5, in a state of impeccable preservation – the equivalent of Barratt Homes bringing in Peter Zumthor to design part of one of their estates. St Bernard's is built into a hill, with car parks under the houses and pedestrian passageways to the terraces, although signs remind you that the land is, in fact, private, and that you aren't really supposed to be here. The materials are exquisitely used, stock brick and wood treated as luxurious rather than generic. 'Public' gardens are lushly overgrown, meeting the sharp lines of Atelier 5's executive Brutalism. The effect is not particularly European, however; rather it looks as if some of the Case Study Houses designed by Californian Modernists in the 1950s had strayed accidentally into Surrey. Pacific Palisades in Purley.

However, these are exceptional; much more typical is the sprawl around the Borough's centre, those burbs where 'going into town' means going into Croydon, not the West End. Thornton Heath, for instance. Many of these low-rise areas have their terraces, semis and villas suddenly interrupted by office blocks that seem to have got lost on their way from Cannon Street to East Croydon station. One such monster dominates much of Thornton Heath, squat and massively wide. It's also here that the borough's only



notable post-1970s building has just been completed, a library extension by FAT. Their wilful attempts to *épater les architecturaux bourgeois* mask – or as they would no doubt see it, accentuate – an attention to architecture’s social purpose that is unusual in the UK today. Both of these aspects can be seen when you first approach the library. It’s the extension to an old Carnegie Library, a pocket-baroque in brick and Portland stone. Their addition is a white box with ‘LIBRARY’ in supergraphics across the top, the ostensible modernism ‘subverted’ by an incongruous support, put there as an evocation in concrete of the ubiquitous suburban half-timbering. Drop the ‘OMG jokes’ reaction for a second (if we’re lucky, the architects might eventually do the same), and this is a remarkably serious, not at all whimsical public building, warm, welcoming and on this Tuesday afternoon in May, very well used. Its built-in chairs and sofas look *comfortable*, which is an interestingly rare thing in new architecture. As a building, it’s a fantastic snub to the current rash of library closures.

Thornton Heath Library takes a small-scale thing and makes it better, in a place with large-scale problems. Far more common attempts to ‘solve’ these can be found in the overdeveloped new spec blocks of flats, or Saunders Architects’ generic Blairbuild Thornton Heath Leisure Centre, with its swoopy roofs and tinny cladding. Maybe these will survive long enough to acquire

central Croydon's unexpected period charm, but making the same mistake twice is somewhat less forgivable. The London Borough of Croydon has suffered from over a century of non-plan, and the result is chaos – dereliction next to newbuild, dramatically crammed and then almost criminally low-density. It's full of surprises for the walker, but it's a disastrous way to run a city, as the horrendous traffic, or the decidedly tense tenor of public interaction, makes very clear. But what does it say about the South East, suburban England, the area that lords it over the rest of the country? This place is, in theory, a major example of our most powerful, most wealthy, most leafy areas. You'd never guess, though, as it feels like another Britain entirely – a poor but multiracial, intriguing but miserable place which could really do with social planning and social housing, rather than more speculation and a Business Improvement District. Croydon is a *place*. It could be much more of one.

Greater Croydon

The entirely excellent Croydon Tramlink connects the town centre with a large hinterland stretching into the boroughs of Bromley, Merton and Sutton, which can in turn be considered a kind of Greater Croydon. The Tramlink itself is exactly the same sort of entity as the Manchester Metrolink, the Sheffield Supertram or Birmingham's 'Metro' – a tram that partially runs on streets, partially on specially built concrete viaducts, and partially on railway tracks. They called these 'Metrotrams' in the Soviet Union, where they also built opulent futuristic shelters for them. The Tramlink doesn't have these, but it is once again very striking that a London suburb has been in advance of much of the UK's larger cities in the provision of rapid transit. So six months after the first trip out, curious to have a peek at the other Greater Croydon, away from the tense streets of the town centre and Thornton Heath, we took the Tramlink out to Mitcham Junction. On our way we passed the site of the furniture store burnt out in the August riots, with a block of flats-above-shops still charred and boarded up, a reminder of the moment when all that simmering briefly overflowed. The Tram then traverses an unexpected stretch of very heavy industry,

a vast site that now seems unevenly divided between warehousing, light industrial units and, mostly, enormous exurban retail units with gapingly wide surface car parks. From here, we set out to see some of the architecture of the future. Or, rather, we went to find two potential forms of voluntaristic urbanism that the future might promise for London and elsewhere.

The London Borough of Sutton, run by Whigs and Tories, is one of the only major local authorities to become an official 'Vanguard Area' of the 'Big Society'. This piece of 'progressive nonsense', as the internal Conservative discussion has it,¹¹ entails the transfer of formerly remunerated labour over to volunteers, with accompanying swingeing cuts to council budgets and pay-rolls. Initially seduced by the vaguely co-operative rhetoric, a real city, Liverpool, signed up to be Big Society pioneers; but upon realizing rather belatedly that the Big Society was essentially a not particularly sophisticated cover for throwing public-sector workers out of their jobs and outsourcing services to Serco and Capita, it pulled out, leaving this affluent Outer London Borough (and nearby, even posher Windsor) to do the pioneering by itself. The process, without the cuddly rhetoric, can be seen at its most rapacious in the downsized 'EasyCouncil' in the inner-London borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, where an outright class war is being fought between super-rich incomers and the tenants of its council estates. Sutton has far fewer poor people in it, so is able to stay cuddly, and accordingly it is the Whigs rather than the Tories that dominate the local council. Their approach to the question is best encompassed by the poster you can find on Sutton Council's website, where 'BIG SOCIETY' is in yellow, with a smiley face in the 'O'; 'NOT BIG GOVERNMENT' is in red, with a frowning face in the 'O'. They really do think we're that stupid.

The Future (Optimistic)

In any case the borough is an ambitious one, with various plans for 'sustainable' settlements in Hackbridge and Beddington, and a Big Society focus amongst the waters of Carshalton. Accordingly, there should be a lot to see. Making our way

from Mitcham Junction, we proceed to Beddington, home of a complex called BedZED, or in full, Beddington Zero (Fossil) Energy Development. This is an estate of the Peabody Trust, the most famous of the unelected charitable organizations considered more trustworthy custodians of social housing than democratically-controlled local authorities; a ‘progressive’ side to our contemporary neo-Victorianism. The Trust was founded by a banker, George Peabody, a century and a half ago (which has lately made him the subject for occasional ‘when bankers were nice’ features and programmes), and is best known for immense, barrack-like cliffs of stock-brick housing across the second half of the nineteenth century, throughout inner London. The demise of council housing left the likes of Peabody as the last line of defence, and its directors, such as Dickon Robinson and latterly Claire Bennie, have been genuine enthusiasts for architecture and planning, which marks them out somewhat. BedZED is perhaps their most all-encompassing twenty-first-century scheme, an early 2000s project whose environmental and social seriousness is admirable, albeit cloaked by an architectural bumptiousness.

It is not exactly blessed with a delightful site. BedZED faces at one corner a large, straggling post-war estate of little wit or imagination, at another a crushingly dull development of ’90s mock-Tudor spec flats, and has as its hinterland one of those illusory places where London seems to end entirely, in pylons, brackish marshes and placid horses. It’s a long walk from Mitcham Junction Tramlink, or a stroll from Hackbridge station – not exactly remote, but hardly well-connected either. It’s a large development by contemporary standards, several rows of flats, accessible from the ground but partly connected by arched metal walkways. Creepers grow over much of it. The design is a superior essay in the now-defunct Blairite idiom (Peabody’s most recent estate, finished in early 2012 in Pimlico, reverts to their original yellow-brick monumentality, a sure sign of a shift in architectural culture). There is a lot of wood cladding; there are metal balconies; there is a great deal of glass. There is also some residual ‘vernacular’, in that the street façades are partly in an industrial red brick. The wood-clad upper storeys have a barrel-shaped overhang, and are topped with solar panels and

multicoloured chimneys, a spout-cowl vaguely like a hen's crest. At the edge of the estate is a combined power station running on the estate's own waste, which also has a café and a social centre. The architects, Bill Dunster, and the designers of the energy-generating system, BioRegional, both have offices on site. Most 'sustainable' developments are fudges of various kinds, well-insulated but concrete-framed blocks, but this one really does what it claims; it really is an entire estate that is self-sufficient in energy. Whatever one's opinion of the ethics or political efficacy of 'opting out' of a carbon-generated national grid – my view is probably fairly predictable – this place has had the courage of its convictions. It's notable how it has had practically no successors.

This isn't just the project of some 'green entrepreneurs', though, but in theory a full-scale social housing estate. How much does it actually work as such? It may be foolhardy to make generalizations on brief acquaintance, but there were ample semiotic clues that some might have moved here because of Lifestyle (those growing their own veg on the balconies), and others because they had got lucky on the waiting list (those with St George flags covering most of the floor-to-ceiling windows). Remarkably for a place so surrounded by desolation, there's a lot of people milling around. That might be a consequence of the scheme's density, which feels pretty odd in front of a great big scrubby expanse, but comes over as quite genuinely warm, or maybe that's just by comparison. The most memorable effect is created by the pedestrian route under the arched overhead walkways, where half of what you can see has been overrun by greenery. The car-free spaces feel genuinely permeable and relaxed; you are even trusted to wander around the walkways without any gating. If, as is surely the case, a zero-carbon economy entails a massive new industrial revolution, then this place might be a genuine paragon. Yet it is so obviously an enclave that it's hard to sustain the optimism; it may in fact just be a new incarnation of the cool, exclusive modernist suburbia of St Bernard's, albeit with a 'social' percentage. Libertarian bores might like to complain about sustainability regulations, but the point remains that there is still only one BedZED in the UK, and it's tucked away in Beddington, without a night bus. It's hard to imagine the coalition building more.



The Future (Pessimistic)

As a case in point, neighbouring Hackbridge, which the Whigs are claiming as a ‘sustainable suburb’, contains two large new blocks in the most banal and debased Urban Renaissance idiom: both taking up tight corner sites, both heavily overdeveloped, both of them just concrete frames encased in ‘friendly’ yellow-brick cladding. The area around is a particularly odd outer-London landscape, where factories and village closes sit next to each other without the intervention of zoning regulations. As you cross the thin, marshy River Wandle, there is a small, mildly Brutalist estate of low-lying blocks of flats, pebbly concrete and white weatherboarding. Most of them pull back away from the river, leaving a quiet public space where they could have maximized rental value. Then there’s an incongruous cul-de-sac of breeze-block flat-roofed cottages in the East Tilbury manner, then an acre or so of aching Neighbourhood-Watched subtopia, before you eventually arrive in Carshalton.

Carshalton is, I’m told, the real Big Society enthusiast in the area, itching to deregulate and voluntarize itself so long as the TfL buses still pass through. As a village that was evidently swallowed

up by London later than many others, this is another place that feels sharply like an enclave, a place carved out by its inhabitants as a way of remaining genteel within the Wen's outer circles. At first it's indistinguishable from the 1930s ribbon development all around, with the PFI college ('Carshalton College – Realising Ambitions') easily imaginable in Hackney. Less typical are the little weatherboarded houses and Garden Suburb closes, and least typical of all is the central feature of Carshalton – its ponds, pretty expanses framed by what looks like one-part fishing village to one-part John Betjeman Surrey utopia. The high street just off here has the sort of picturesque curve and dip that puts an extra few thousand on the price of property; surely those living here put 'Surrey' rather than 'London' on their correspondence, so convincing is the village illusion. Of course some in *this* place enjoy the idea of running their own public services, putting in a bit of time en route to the golf course. A Union Jack hangs from a window in this enclave, to complement the flag of St George in the other enclave at Beddington.

We're now out of Greater Croydon, out of the Tramlink's remit, although ten minutes on the bus takes us to West Croydon's carceral bus station, from which we embark to Valley Park, the site of the former Croydon Power Station, now IKEA. Inner Croydon might feel like a fairly urban and dense place, but that's all absolutely exploded here, just a short distance away. Shed after neon-lit Shed, all of them enormous outlets for sundry retail chains, all of them with a great expanse of car parking in front. It's the exact sort of disurbanism that the last twenty years of planning policy has purported (not always entirely honestly) to oppose, and hence the exact sort that is supposed to pioneer 'recovery', after the planning regulations have been sufficiently dismantled. BedZED and this place are surely diametrically opposed in every possible way, but then it hasn't been unusual over the last two decades to find strip malls abutting sustainable Millennium Villages. Even with that in mind, there's something especially foul about Valley Park, an inescapable pall of menace. The chimneys of the Power Station now decorate IKEA, a place dedicated to *interior* design, to keeping one's own house in order, and letting all outside it go to hell.



Chapter Nine

Plymouth: Fables of the Reconstruction

In Praise of Blitzed Cities

Bombed cities are all different, but they all have a similar feeling. That doesn't mean they're homogeneous, far from it, but that the loss at their heart is similar, if often different in scale. On the far more brutally fought Eastern front, there are several European cities where a tiny proportion of the population can trace their families' presence there further back than the late 1940s. Cities that were wiped out, like Warsaw; cities where an entire population was removed and another population resettled there, like Breslau/Wrocław, Königsberg/Kaliningrad, Lwow/Lviv. In many of the bombed English cities, you feel like this has taken place even when it hasn't – as if the entire city had been vacated and resettled with a whole other group of people having entirely different values and different ways of seeing the world. Sometimes, in the more grandiose of the Blitzed cities, along the walkways of Sheffield or Thamesmead, say, you feel something even harsher – that this new city was built by some race of giants that disappeared, leaving us an environment that's too big, too dramatic, too confident, for the likes of us. Whichever way the question is posed, the bombed cities are still, even now, sixty years later, considered ugly and jarring and 'alien'.

They're incoherent, they're strange, they're dramatic, they're modern, they're messy, they're not 'historic', except for the occasional eerie reconstructed reservation. This is their strength. In the European cities that the Luftwaffe or the RAF didn't do

over, you have a nineteenth-century centre ringed by post-war housing, a clear divide between one and the other which curdled over the decades into a strict spatial divide between one sort of people and another sort of people. In the bombed cities, we don't have that – we have council flats next to Regency terraces next to parks conjured up from bomb sites. The super-rich sleep slightly less easily in their beds, erecting gates around their new developments to reflect how unsafe they feel. Tourists shun the new places, described in the guides as 'concrete jungles' and 'monstrous carbuncles'. In the process these once famous forgotten cities have forged some of the strongest, and strangest, identities in the UK.

If you grew up somewhere like this, time feels out of joint. You will have spent your youth watching tall, ultra-modern constructions being knocked down, and brick simulations of Victorian streets that never existed being built in their place. You will have used the loathed public spaces for loitering – hung around in the precincts, drunk cider in the civic amenities, like greasier, pimplier versions of the attenuated watercolour peopleoids that populated the drawings of 1940s planners. The plazas were ringed with charity shops, and it seemed oddly just and fitting – the worn elegance of the post-war city making a dignified withdrawal from the screeching crassness of the giant, exurban American malls. But there is in these cities a double absence. Modernity did continue in a disavowed form, after all, in the almost hidden grandeur of the container port, the gigantic automated spectacle of cranes, tracks and multicoloured boxes that everyone conspires not to look at. Ports were supposedly about the nautical tourism that filled the derelict docks, the reminiscence over the days when sailors actually got off the boat, not this awesome robotic spectacle with its practically invisible workers. A third loss is only just slowly starting to be registered – the loss of the socialist spirit that impelled us to redesign our chaotic, profiteering cities as something unified, public and civic, without gates, fences or hierarchies. The centre of Plymouth is one of the UK's most spectacular places to feel this. At the heart of it is one great ensemble.

England's Last Great Street

When you arrive, it's blocked off by a car park, and shadowed by a clearly once shiny but now greying glass office block; but you find it soon enough. It starts with a series of underpasses. These aren't your common or garden subways, but wide, open things, a sort of combination of underpass and grand public square. Pass under them and you're right in the middle of an axis, flanked by large, severe Portland stone buildings. The space is vast, something which subsequent planners have tried to efface by dint of everything from funfairs to gardens to giant TV screens. Stylistically, this boulevard is not quite classical, but not quite modernist either; for that, you must walk all the way to the end, where you'll find three towers. On the axis is a Guildhall, Romanesque mixed with Mid-Century Modern, and a high-rise Civic Centre, elegant, well-made and almost derelict. Further on is a bland and shoddy Holiday Inn, very much occupied, but that passes unnoticed, because you're then at the Hoe, a wide public park looking out over a glorious waterfront. The panoramic view takes in warships, rolling green hills and rocky Cornish cliffs, and you have a lighthouse, a lido, and an art deco war memorial for company. The whole thing is one continuous, planned piece of urbanism. This is Armada Way, the main street of Plymouth city centre.

It's the axial fulcrum of a comprehensive plan, in the British city more damaged than any other by Luftwaffe attacks. Patrick Abercrombie's masterplan was not especially avant-garde – certainly a lot less so than his plans for London – and nor was the architecture. It's in a style which is as yet un-named, some sort of Attlee-Scando-Stalino-classicism, which anyone familiar with a Broadmead, a Moor or an Above Bar will recognize; though it is superior to all of these, avoiding their fudges and compromises. Architecturally, it lacks the futurity of near-contemporaries such as London's ultra-modernist Churchill Gardens or populist Lansbury Estate, or the multilevel replanning of Coventry. Its compatriots are elsewhere – Auguste Perret's Le Havre, or, rather more controversially, post-war East Berlin or Warsaw. A big boulevard for the tanks to go down (this is a garrison town

after all), symmetrical stone buildings, ceremonial plazas. It's not what 1950s critics considered 'the architecture of democracy'. At this distance, however, its insistence on the traditional street seems more contemporary, as does its Continental nature – a space seemingly designed for cafés to spill out onto the pavement, which, in good weather – we're here in June – they do. If, for Aldo Rossi, Berlin's Stalinallee was 'Europe's last great street', then Armada Way is certainly Britain's last.

It's also a counterfactual in stone. Abercrombie's Plymouth is what might have happened everywhere in the UK if serious, ideological modernism had never enjoyed its brief moment of planning hegemony, with its concrete and glass and its new approach to planning. Plymouth's driving ideas are those of inter-war, twilight-of-empire Britain, as are its architects – Thomas Tait, William Crabtree, Louis de Soissons, Giles Gilbert Scott. The influences of Edwin Lutyens's New Delhi, or Charles Holden's Orwellian Senate House in Bloomsbury are also palpable. It's curious that the architectural historian and campaigner Gavin Stamp, for instance, has recently repeated the claim that 1940s–50s Plymouth brought little of value to replace the destroyed city, given that it represents exactly what he has been arguing for in British architecture and planning for some decades. These dignified masonry buildings, in a non-dogmatic classical tradition, are equally far from Le Corbusier and Leon Krier. But strangely enough, central Plymouth is seemingly held in no greater public affection than the more hard-line Coventry or Sheffield. Invariably, the plan is described as a 'concrete jungle' in circles non-architectural, despite the fact that the dominant materials are Portland stone, granite and brick. It's a reminder that modernity and planning itself, not its stylistic vagaries, are what offend a certain kind of British psyche. It is not *pretty*. In spirit it may be nearer to Georgian Bath than anything else designed in the twentieth century, but central Plymouth is not picturesque, and some will never forgive it for that.

What it does prove, however, is that this modernized classicism was tired by the late 1940s. Some individual buildings are very impressive – the two stepped department stores which provide the axis's main focus, by Tait and Alec French, are looming

powerful as anything from the 1930s, and B. C. Sherren's National Provincial Bank is lovely, and its stripped classical columns and Scandinavian blue-tiled clock tower are remarkably similar to the precisely contemporary Finland Station in Leningrad. Overall, though, it is the cohesiveness, planting and sheer generosity of space that are really of value here. The architecture represents an aesthetic in its dotage. In a very prominent place is Giles Gilbert Scott's last completed church, a sadly thin, wan, provincial design from the architect of such monstrous masterpieces as Battersea Power Station and Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral.

In some ways, central Plymouth is a reminder of just how necessary modernism was. The turn to modernism within the Abercrombie Plan, in slightly later structures like the Civic Centre and the wonderful Pannier Market, reflect this feeling of relative lightness and ease, especially in the whale-like concrete interior of the latter. After the 1960s, the grand civic gesture sometimes continued in a different form; Peter Moro's late 1970s Theatre Royal is central Plymouth's only real Brutalist building, and an excellent one, its geometrical complexity and harsh volumes akin more to Moro's ex-Tecton partner Lasdun than to his own more clipped work. Nearby, The Pavilions is a messily



ambitious structure where pedways link a swimming pool to a car park, shopping and then back to the Abercrombie centre, a laudably sweeping undertaking marred by cheap and nasty '80s retail detailing. After this, not much, but it's a formidable ensemble, of worldwide significance. Like nineteenth-century Glasgow, or twentieth-century Sheffield or Coventry, Plymouth doesn't seem to know how important it is as a piece of urbanism and a place for architecture. In fact, it seems bent on trying to destroy the things that make it important. The Civic Centre was very nearly demolished, listed (against the council's own opposition) before it could be levelled for a shopping mall. The edges of the Abercrombie Plan are frayed, a mix of dereliction and dross.

Stare Miasto

Plymouth is lucky enough to have both one of the UK's most complete pieces of grand city planning and one of the most interesting, albeit slightly sanitized, areas of ad hoc inner-urban townscape. Walk round the breathtaking panorama of the Hoe past the high walls of an inadvertently proto-Brutalist fortress, still used by the military, and you're in the Barbican, an area once slated for demolition, but restored by the Civic Trust movements of the 1960s and 70s. It's full of passages and alleys, strange and surprising vernacular architecture and, interestingly, very sensitive modernist infill. Plymouth evidently had one of the best post-war City Architects in Hector Stirling, and his Paton Watson Quadrant is a lovely council estate of lush, bright stone, tile-hanging, Swedish details and easy informality, a remarkable contrast with the Baron Haussmann melodrama of Armada Way or Royal Parade just a few yards away. Along the alleys of tea shops and ice-cream parlours you can find almost cubistic mini-blocks of flats next to the half-timbering. Sadly, all this cleverness and warmth gives way further along Sutton Harbour to the luxury architecture of the 1990s and 2000s, with several more-or-less miserable blocks of flats, crowded onto their sites. Sometime in the 1970s or 1980s Plymouth seemed to lose all its confidence, seemed to start to hate itself. It's a familiar enough story in the north of England, and deindustrialized, poor, shabby but often glorious old Plymouth



has more in common with a Bradford or a Liverpool than with the seaside, spa and silicon towns of the South.

The place's reputation, its Pilgrim Fathers-related fame, doesn't translate much into self-esteem, let alone tourism. The Barbican has its art galleries and boutiques, but I'm told that they change hands at a rapid rate. There's no naval or maritime museum, no self-commemoration, and perhaps the still-existing functions of the place are the reason for this. The Royal Navy still have their base in Devonport, off-limits to the public; ships are still built in Plymouth, albeit without a particularly large workforce, and this may keep the city from dying entirely, but it also helps to keep it lumpen. You see it in the Union Jack T-shirts you can buy in Pannier Market, with 'OUR PLACE – OUR BASE' on them. You can see it in the posters for boxing at the Guildhall, where ten pasty pugilists pose as if about to smack you in the mouth. You could find local pride in it, of course, but it still faces the central problem of the working-class city that votes Tory: that it is loyal to its natural enemies, that it sides with its oppressor. Nonetheless, the gradual closure of some parts of the dockyard opens up another potential Plymouth, one that briefly shared in the abortive Urban Renaissance.

Stonehouse boasts a development by Mancunian hipster entrepreneurs Urban Splash, a giant loft conversion of John Rennie's severe classical King William Victualling Yard. It is, by the standards of this developer, atypically sensitive. Unlike the modernist buildings they have redeveloped, it has survived without anodized aluminium cladding, without any lime green or hot pink, which is a tribute of sorts to Plymouth's conservationists. I had the honour of staying in one of these buildings with friends, two Polish architects who proceeded to list the problems they had with the detailing. If you didn't mind the tiny size of the place and the fact that the windows and floors seemed to be deliberately designed to minimize light, it was very pleasant. The Urban Splash flags all round the development adjoin the usual middle-class cafés and bars, although somewhat sparse on the ground. When you reach the gate that leads out of the Victualling Yard, the appeal of the place becomes obvious – its previous function means that it's a community coming pre-gated. It looks out onto an earlier version of luxury waterside living, the last of the modernist buildings in Plymouth – an apartment block, Ocean Court, a zippy '70s sci-fi irregular ziggurat. It's the sort of thing you might find in Benidorm. Adjacent are a couple of surviving sheds that put together warships and yachts. Normally, this would be an area of great tension, but the middle-class enclaves in Plymouth are so small that class cleansing seems a long way off, at least until prejudice lifts and the south-western bourgeoisie realize how lovely a city they have in their midst.

One reason for this prejudice, other than ignorance, can surely be found in the way that the planned Plymouth connects with the residential areas around it. The joins are drastically unpretty. Stonehouse itself, while never quite as regular as some of its south-western near-neighbours, is an area of elegant classical terraces, with outbreaks of pillared formality in amongst houses painted in multiple bright colours, as in Bristol. Some have a Georgian rectitude, some evoke a fishing village more than a big city, but the effect is relaxed and, like the Abercrombie Plan, European. The bombsite infill produced by the city council under Hector Stirling is completely Swedish. Four-storey blocks on a Y-shaped plan, pitched roofs, simple details, large balconies and communal

gardens enclosed by rubble-stone walls. They don't continue the lines of terraces, but feel of a piece with them nonetheless. Then you meet the mess that divides Stonehouse from the city centre. A large branch of Aldi, of the expected architectural repugnance, reveals itself to be boarded up. A high street leads to the centre, but it's in a wretched state of disrepair. The Grand Theatre pub, an art nouveau gin palace, has a tree growing out of it – as does the building next door, a former Furniture Warehouse. The Grand Theatre itself is a fantastical music hall unlike everything else in Plymouth, and features on its façade panels depicting scenes of imperial and naval triumph. It too appears to be falling apart – the whole street just seems to have been forgotten, the natural link between the residential areas and the centre abandoned to a degree where it almost feels post-apocalyptic. Then a sorry roundabout, like the planned centre on an Aldi budget, leads eventually to the Market and the main streets. The ubiquitous dual carriageways efface any attempt at coherence. The Barbican, Stonehouse and the Centre are all great pieces of urbanism, but linking them together would mean curbing the car – something which Plymouth City Council, mindful of income from its car parks, has no intention of doing.



Plymouth Rock Would Land on Them

The little redevelopment there is in the centre tends to be neither as elegant as in Stonehouse nor as identikit as around Sutton Harbour. Instead there are two structures which have a good pop at the 'iconic'. One is Chapman Taylor's notorious Drake Circus mall, a one-time winner of Building Design's Carbuncle Cup award. It covers and swallows an entire chunk of Abercrombie's Portland stone street, and takes a hard line on photographers. What is most embarrassing is the way it meets one of those straggling landscapes just outside of the centre. The bombed-out Charles Church, left under the Abercrombie Plan as a war memorial on a roundabout, must already have felt strange and marooned. It is surely even more so now that it is framed with giant yellow Trespa wafers. This part is of course the iconic bit, the past-and-present-meeting-in-harmony moment, where the blown-up face of a Primark model looms over the spire, just so we know who is in charge. Its other façade is an obnoxious, windowless car park which faces a 'public' square; facing that is Henning Larsen's Roland Levinsky Building for the University, containing classrooms, offices and studios. Like many an industrial town, Plymouth has a large and expanding ex-Poly, or rather an ex-Poly that was expanding before the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees. The town evidently has a fair degree of hostility to the gown, and even more so – remember this is OUR PLACE, OUR BASE – to the foreign students that pay the largest fees. Perhaps the only time Plymouth has made national news in recent years is when shops here began displaying signs: 'ONLY ONE FOREIGN STUDENT AT A TIME'.

Perhaps mindful of its controversial status in a naval town, the University decided to make a Big Statement here, to which end they hired the well-respected Danish firm Henning Larsen, presumably recognizing the Scandinavian provenance of much post-1945 Plymouth. Or maybe they just hoped for a nice big iconic building. With its combination of gestural vernacular and angular regen shape-making, it's of its time, to say the least, although it genuinely attempts to make something of its prominent site, a decent attempt at civic presence. After I wrote

not entirely critically of this building, several employees of the University took issue. One corrected me as follows: ‘It was a sketch design from two young architects in the Henning Larsen office with no experience of planning at that scale and no completed buildings under their belts. It was then “value engineered” by BDP Bristol who were novated to the main contractor, HBG ... full of good intentions but woefully unresolved to the point that it is near impossible to use for its intended functions and, worse, impossible to adapt to new functions. The shape making does successfully fulfil (the building’s) one intention – that of making a space to instantly impress would-be new students and (importantly) their parents or guardians. Beyond that, it fails at many levels – not the least of which is its environmental performance which, since the sketch design put all-glass façades on the south and north elevations, cannot be improved. When it was finished it was already twenty years out of date.’

Drake Circus and the Levinsky building, though neither with great success, do at least try and make something specific to Plymouth. This is in fact enshrined in the city’s planning policy – they commissioned a plan from David Mackay, who had planned Barcelona in the 1990s, an astute choice given the sweeping boulevard they would be dealing with. Mackay praised the Abercrombie Plan as ‘a masterpiece’, proposing only incremental changes to the road system and the rigid zoning of the original plan. Accordingly, Drake Circus’s wholesale mallification aside, there are only little encroachments into the planned centre, but all of an extremely low quality – prefab hotels, already dated Blairite apartment blocks, a particularly miserable little casino on the site of a cinema. The council themselves evidently have little affection for the original plan, nor seemingly for Mackay’s updating of it, to judge by the refusal to tame the traffic, or their attempt to demolish their own headquarters, the Civic Centre. More encouragingly, the zoning that makes the place so dead on nightfall is being lifted – one of Tait’s great towers is now student flats, inadvertently giving ubiquitous developers Unite their only architecturally notable building. The changes to public space are stranger. While there’s some effective repavings, that make an otherwise shabby city feel incongruously clean in places,

it all leads to the gigantic video screen in the middle of the axis to Armada Way, as if to remind shoppers that they aren't that far from the TV. There's always something a little dystopian about a huge TV screen in a public space, and this one is no exception.

Planned post-war Plymouth is now being recognized as having value, with revisionist publications, such as Jeremy Gould's excellent *Plymouth: Vision of a Modern City*, a map and website, *20th Century City*, several listings by English Heritage, and the possibility of the centre being made a conservation area. It's about time that social democratic Britain was the subject of something more than giggling and ridicule, and there's no doubt that the incremental demolitions of decent buildings around the edges of the place and their replacement with dross should be stopped. Yet that the centre should become an object for Keep Calm and Carry On austerity tourism, or that the dockyards might all get Urban Splashed, both seem equally unlikely. It remains a naval base, gradually and attritionally being replaced by a shopping base for affluent towns in Devon and Cornwall. Plymouth already has its post-industrial leisure, its riverside galleries and loft conversions, and yet remains poor; and the results in other cities that have favoured this approach are hardly encouraging. It needs new ideas, that aren't tied up entirely with bringing in middle-class residents or shoppers. But as a place to come and think about alternatives, you could do a lot worse than this forlorn, bracing city.



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Chapter Ten

Oxford: Quadrangle and *Banlieue*

So You Went to the Other Place?

The Thames Gateway, as noted in Chapter 1, is an attempt to divert the growth of London eastwards. There's one major reason for this, aside from the dozens of deindustrialized sites along the Thames's eastern reaches – the fact that London has spent the last few decades expanding rapidly to the west, entirely under its own steam. To the rail passenger, it has expanded along the old Great West Railway which travellers will now know as First Great Western, who provide in-train entertainment panels, as if you're on a transatlantic flight rather than a train to Bracknell. To the driver, it has expanded along the line of the M4 motorway, a 'corridor' that stretches as far as Swansea; and to the wherryman, the Wen's pustules are creeping directly up the River Thames. Given that here, the New Britain cleaves sharply to the train line, a trip on FGW is one of the few times that the non-driver can really get a view of the place in its purest form. The westward train passes first along the route to Heathrow, then past the industrial and suburban town of Slough, with its outgrowth of Blairite tower blocks by the station. It passes through the compellingly horrible vistas of Reading, where you have a front-line seat for one of the more comprehensively remade recent cities: train-side business parks with delicate, expensive architecture that looks authentically Californian; sad, shoddy Blair-era yuppiedromes; 'iconic' office skyscrapers that look suspiciously empty, and then the grim, blasted remains of a Victorian factory town. The green belt

is next interrupted by the inexplicable montage of cooling towers and Barratt Noddyhomes in Didcot, and after that by the giant edge-city factories of Swindon. If the ‘new economy’ – at least in terms of software, research, high-tech – really exists as anything other than the organized fraud of property speculation and ‘financial services’, then it exists here. That the Thames Valley is the locus for this makes clear that the geographical spread of power in the new economy is exactly the same as it was in the old – a route which runs, essentially, between London and Oxford.

Oxford is not ostensibly high-tech in the same way as Cambridge, whose ‘Silicon Fen’ is signposted by the science parks on its outskirts. Oxford remains a Harry Potter playground in its heart, although it somehow coexists as a dying Midlands industrial town, another important difference with its East Anglian competitor. The Oxford–London corridor of power dominates British politics as much as it ever has. If it isn’t the ignorant, coked-up thugs of the Bullingdon Club on the government benches, it’s the earnest ex-PPE students and Oxford Union debaters on the opposition bench. Oxford is, not to put too fine a point on it, enemy territory. It also has some staggeringly beautiful architecture, of various centuries, so it would seem necessary to take its temperature – and to compare official ‘Oxford’ with the Oxford of the car factories and the Oxford of Blackbird Leys, an ‘overspill’ estate which is one of the poorest in the UK. Oxford is rare in containing within it both of the two factions of British capitalism, both landed old money and industrial new money, although the absence of industry and the smug dominance of the University would suggest that there is really no contest.

I arrived in Oxford armed with Nikolaus Pevsner’s unfinished, recently reassembled opus *Visual Planning and the Picturesque*, a work where the great Hegelian topographer wanders round Oxford, Lincoln’s Inn in London and Roehampton’s Alton Estate, seeing all of them as exemplars of an irregular, organic approach to planning based on juxtaposition and flow rather than orders and axes, that he sees – debatably, but interestingly – as a quintessentially English approach to towns. It’s a valid way of planning a city, no doubt, but Oxford as a whole has certain large-scale differences with how most of the cities I like work.



An early, easy but exemplary moment is the approach from the railway station. Like Cambridge, Oxford is based on making sure industrial modernity doesn't intrude too far into the heart of the city, so that your first sight of one of the world's most famous cities is a station like a 1980s shopping centre, a car park, and some volume housebuilders' dreck. The cities that look exciting from the train – in this book, Birmingham, Brighton, Edinburgh, Newport – pitch you straight into the city and its bridges, office blocks and spires. There have been minor attempts to rectify this in Oxford in recent years, specifically in the Saïd Business School. Irrespective of its function, the design by Dixon Jones is fascinating, in the faintly chilling and painterly Mediterranean style common to Aldo Rossi and Giorgio de Chirico, a brick colonnade with a stepped, stylized copper tower. It's a start.

You've Got to Hide Your Modernism Away

Oxford's most 'picturesque' moments are also spectacularly exclusive: the majority of the spaces catalogued in Pevsner's study are basically private quadrangles, open only at the colleges' discretion. I'm here with a student who has a swipe card, a

tellingly security-conscious concession to modernity which gets us into practically everywhere, enabling him to give me one of the most rewarding tours of modern architecture available in the UK – yet through a form of urbanism that seems alien to the open city post-war modernism promised. The college, courtyard and quadrangle system has direct consequences for the modern architecture of Oxford. While in Cambridge there are places such as the Sidgwick Site, where modernism takes centre stage, there's nothing of the sort in its Thames-side competitor, although there is a great deal to discover. It's all post-war, it's all very good, and it's nearly all hidden away where the tourists won't look. So, at St John's College you might enter through an authentically medieval courtyard, after a little while you will come to something like the Beehives. These were the first Modernist buildings in town, designed in the '50s by the Architects Co-Partnership at a time when most of Oxford's new buildings were neo-Georgian. They're accommodation for students, detailed in a clipped, hard stone, with miniature spires at the peaks. But the ethos was different, not solely in its modernity – the architects were a co-operative, sincerely committed to the new social democratic Britain, and the effect is not at all hierarchical.



What does this matter, though, when it is inserted into such a hierarchical system?

The Harold Wilson Labour governments' intent seemed to be making a more meritocratic ruling class by opening up education to gifted working-class youth, encouraging a real social mobility which did, it should be admitted, differ from the property-based inducements of Thatcher and Blair. While this tended to occlude the possibility of getting rid of the class system altogether, it at least offered to create a more permeable and dynamic version of class society. Modernism, when it belatedly arrived in Oxford, followed the rules of an inherently exclusive and undemocratic city, vaguely attempting to infuse it with a more democratic sense of space and style. As they're fundamentally unchallenged by it, the colleges treat it very well. For all the high-profile crowing about controversial structures such as James Stirling's Florey Building, here you will find no spalling concrete, no rusting steel windows, no falling red tiles. Curiously, the process of incrementally adding spatially 'new' annexes to the quadrangles continued after modernism, in an even more self-conscious fashion.

In St John's College, prickly Brutalist quadrangles by Arup give way to early-90s postmodernism by MacCormac Jamieson Pritchard. As if to reinforce the Lewis Carroll feel, there's a giant chessboard in their stock-brick assemblage of amphitheatres and walkways. These structures continue modernism's insights into space – there's movement here above and below, multiple levels, passageways and trapdoors, all of which would never be allowed somewhere that was to be Secured by Design. It's welcoming, surprising and flowing space, if you're allowed in. But all this is emphatically not public. My friend's electronic touch-card is here applied to a tiny, spiked door. In fact, in subscribing to its essentials while subverting its stylistic unity, modernism and Pomo might just have been following in the footsteps of the various deliberately crass and aggressive Ruskinians of the nineteenth century – like William Butterfield's buildings at Keble College, an industrial red-brick fireworks display beamed down from Cottonopolis or Brum, which is perhaps more of an attack on Oxonian assumptions than anything in concrete. This in turn leads to one of the most extraordinary examples of the city's stealth modernism,

Ahrends Burton and Koralek's snaking high-tech extension, a remarkable brown-glass tentacle thrown out along a lawn, a bit of which was later snipped off by the prolifically boring Rick Mather Architects, purveyors of sickeningly tasteful modernist refurbishments to the Ashmolean Museum and elsewhere.

When you finally emerge from the secrecy and privacy, the architectural enclosure and excitement of the quadrangular system, Oxford becomes less dense, less full of surprises, and feels more like Cambridge: straggling, suburban, dotted with landmarks. One of these is a gigantic Brutalist laboratory by the modern architect most associated with Cambridge, Leslie Martin. Weirdly, where everyone can see it, it's in a far more parlous state than every other bit of Oxford Modern – as if the owners want to punish it for presumptuousness in being both modern and actually visible to the civilian. The concrete is worn, and a tragically cheap PFI extension in blue Trespa has been added at the corners and on top. Next to this is a Leslie Martin building in far better nick, the Libraries. This is in the first book about architecture I ever bought, a 1960s Pelican *History of English Architecture*, where they describe it as 'dynastic' – which sounds about right. Somewhere between Hilversum and Assyria, though my guide suggests Odessa. From there, along gaping voids of playing fields, we come to St Catherine's College, Arne Jacobsen's Grade I listed High Modernist opus.

The entrance to it is by Stephen Hodder, which sits uneasily between Jacobsen's obsessively composed elegance and a more timid, business-park-like pseudomodernism. Pevsner would surely have regarded this attempt to fit in as a big mistake, a misreading of the picturesque qualities of Oxford planning. St Catherine's, being designed by an internationally famous Dane and all, is often considered offensively un-English. Which is funny, as the first thing it makes me think of, in its ruthless rectilinear sweep set amongst greenery, is the Hunstanton School by Alison and Peter Smithson: a tough, sleek, American-influenced design, which as a Secondary Modern catered for a rather different post-war educational clientele. Both have something very Alexander Pope about them – measured, unnatural, Augustan. I prefer not to use the term High Modernism, considering it

pernicious and often meaningless, but if it means anything in architecture it means this, as sure as it means Woolf or Eliot in literature. It proclaims itself as a Work of Art, and emphatically *not* a popular one, whereas modernism on the whole is usually engaged, whatever some may try to prove, in a constant, if tortured, dialogue with the popular. Being ‘High’, St Catherine’s eschews montage and juxtaposition, standing on its own. Yet if it does have anything to do with Oxford it’s in the *Alice* element, the miniature mazes of topiary that define and demarcate the space.

As a focus, a monument, an attempt to set up a new version of a dreaming spire, St Catherine’s has a concrete tower. This too evokes something Italian and eerily Rationalist. While the Saïd Business School suggests de Chirico, this closely resembles the Sant’Elia Memorial in Como, northern Italy, designed under Mussolini by the fascist modernist Giuseppe Terragni, although it’s significantly more trim and chic than anything the Italian Futurists cooked up. There is nothing particularly English in this, nothing picturesque, although it perhaps suggests that the architectural influence of the Grand Tour endured into the mid-twentieth century. St Catherine’s is a fascinating series of well-made monuments, and I could look at this place for hours, but – and here I conform appallingly to English stereotype – I could never love it. Pevsner did, which is strange, as although it accords with his liking for a low-voltage, rationalized modernism, it’s not remotely connected to the ‘placeness’ of Oxford, except perhaps in its expense. Out from here, we hit some postmodernism of a much more typical kind than the thoughtful spatial manipulations of a Richard MacCormac – a villa with a Victorian roofline, Georgian coursing and Thatcherite brickwork.

Class and the Picturesque in Oxford City Centre

The centre, in as much as it’s possible to speak of a centre in Oxford, arranges itself around magnificent baroque constructions by Wren, Gibbs, Hawksmoor. No revisionism here – they are wonders of architecture, and wonders in the relationship of buildings to each other – but nobody needs reminding of this fact. We’re here while the students are on holiday, and there

are many people other than me snapping away avidly at the Radcliffe Camera and All Souls. It's so funny how Modern architects, when they were commissioned to build here, conformed to this place and didn't want to disrupt it. The tiny Holywells shop was designed by Glasgow Brutalists Andy MacMillan and Isi Metzstein, architects capable of great aggression and wilfulness – but here, they slotted into the streetline a building so delicate, small-scale and unassuming that even Charles Windsor couldn't possibly object. I imagine that a hypothetical Prince-sympathizing reader of *Visual Planning and the Picturesque* would find it difficult to discern the picturesque, the visual drama and humanism, in Pevsner's later examples such as the Alton council estate in South West London, simply because of its function – because it's a series of mere council blocks and maisonettes, no matter how intelligently, windingly or haphazardly organized. If I were being consistent, I would refuse to respond in kind to these little side streets, as where a series of contrasting rooflines along a narrow pathway lead to a bristling Hawksmoor spire – but the cultural signifiers rub me up the wrong way, grate at my inverted snobbery: the olde worlde typeface, the taint of Hogwarts, the cutesy advert selling a '17th Century Hotel'. Such whimsy can in places be invigorating and annoying in irksome measure, as with the neo-Venetian 'Bridge of Sighs' that spans one street, dated 1914. The fantasy is here, at least, entirely convincing. Pevsner proclaims of this site that 'a bridge across a street is always the greatest temptation to explore beyond'. We thought better of it.

It's interesting to see how the three biggest egos in 1960s British architecture – James Stirling and Alison and Peter Smithson – inserted their ideas into all this. We don't see the interior courtyard of Stirling's Florey Building for Queen's College. We couldn't, though a helpful sign read 'ARCHITECTS WHO WANT TO SEE THE OUTSIDE OF THIS BUILDING MUST HAVE PRIOR PERMISSION FROM THE HOME BURSAR'. Extraordinary, really – the assumption is that only architects would want to see one of the most famous buildings by the most famous twentieth-century British architect, one so well-known that even the televised Stirling Prize is named after him; imagine at the Asmolean, 'artists who want to see this painting

must have prior permission'. Here, Oxford merely makes explicit, with its customary bullish, privilege-ridden confidence, what the rest of the country so often assumes. Only architects like architecture (because what you're looking at in the Radcliffe Camera isn't architecture, it's *Heritage*). Via nosing round and trespassing we see enough to, once again, observe how much more massive Stirling's buildings look in photographs than in reality, and to note what a poor bit of planning it is – surrounded by a car park and straggly indeterminate space, taking the Oxonian fixation with hiding away to outrageous extremes. This is, equally tellingly, not Stirling's fault – his plans specified a river walk alongside the building, but the College were not enthused by such dangerous public-spiritedness. The internal space looks wonderful through the grate, though the floor-to-ceiling windows may still be a more empirical reason for unpopularity.

All that said, it's an extremely impressive building. As a piece of stand-alone architecture it has more in common with Butterfield at Keble than anything else, full of colour, tensions and angles. It's a shame that it got plonked in this corner, when it could have been placed somewhere where its postures could have been *aimed* at something, rather than a private matter. Maybe it does do this from above. It loses Picturesqueness points for good reason, not so much visually – Pevsner clearly couldn't stand the more militant modernisms such as Brutalism, expressionism and constructivism, all of which are drawn on by Stirling here – but for its lack of interest in the spirit of the place. It's curious then to note that the Smithsons – who were, in the architectural press of the 1950s, the scourge of Townscape and picturesque planning – did something so mild and contextual. Their halls for St Hilda's are stone-clad, composed and serene. Like many of their buildings (even Robin Hood Gardens, in a way), there's an uneasy attempt to do two seemingly contradictory things. The buildings themselves are austere and not at all ingratiating, deliberately inorganic. Across this they stretch a wooden trellis to encourage planting, to encourage something ad hoc and accidental. It's a fairly arid exercise in dialectic, resulting in no real tension or spark, but the relative softness of the approach compared to their social housing says curious things about the architects' sense of

priorities. Social housing was to be raw and powerful, Oxford colleges tame and retiring. There's nothing necessarily wrong with this – which should inspire more pride? – but the residents of Robin Hood Gardens were given no trellises to invite greenery across the streets in the sky. Not, to be fair, that the council would have maintained any planting.

Non-collegiate residential planning in Oxford is another contrast with Cambridge, again showing something denser and more cohesive. Near the Ashmolean, or especially in the planned enclave of Park Town, you can find some exceptionally orderly classical planning. Not having been to Bath, I don't expect terraces in the south of England to look this ordered and elegant, and grope around for northern comparisons to make sense of them. Halifax, perhaps, which is around the same size. Near to the stone terraces you will find occasional modernist incursions into the actual streetline, only a couple of which the tourists can see. Spindly, Gothic Brutalism from Arup can suddenly interrupt the space of ruling-class comfort, but it recovers instantly from the blow. Oxford keeps its modernity closely guarded, as secretive and exclusive as you'd expect for a place which is still a dominant locus of power – in media, in politics, in the City, wherever – in the UK, even after nearly 900 years. Beautiful as it may be, it's a pity nobody has ever really tried to threaten it: whether for modernist architects or socialist politicians, the aim was reform rather than revolution. We suffer for that lack of mettle.

Oxford in the West Midlands

As befits a city closer to Coventry than to London, Oxford's other half is of the West Midlands, not of the South East. A friend who grew up in Oxford, spoiled by the presence of the dreaming spires, remembered as his first experience of real excitement at architecture a glass bridge at the Morris Cowley works, where you could watch the cars being transported from one end of the factory to the other, above you. This has long since been demolished, but if you're interested in finding that other Oxford, it's in an almost straight line east from the centre. You can get a taste of it from the Westgate Centre, which is along with the not

particularly admirable Oxfordshire County Council offices the most prominent modern structure in central Oxford. The shopping mall itself is of little note, its double-height spaces jazzed up with neo-Georgian details, but the back-end service area shows a radically different conception of the picturesque. I'm not altogether joking: someone really thought out these spaces, really planned their arrangement and spatial organization.

The best way to see this is going round the arse end of the city centre, past one of the twenty-first century's few architectural contributions to Oxford, a Wetherspoons as pseudomodern palazzo. Then you find the car park, whose buckling concrete floors are each given pitched-roofed corners, stacked on top of each other, which may well be a gesture at contextualism. A sky-bridge goes from the car park to the shopping mall, which may or may not have been better if a copy of the Venetian Bridge of Sighs. The main interest is in the circulation spaces at the corner, where there is pedestrian access to the walkway. Long-disused yellow escalators, '60s signage, vividly shaped concrete forms painted white and seldom repainted, the faint smell of urine – classic British modernism. The floors flow into each other, and at every level you get a sense of the entire complex all at once, with thin, elegant concrete supports running between pedestrian ramps. There is picturesque planning inside, but maybe not in the way the building connects with the area around, which is somewhat lacking in tact.

The route – and it is an easy route, you can do the whole thing on the number 5 bus – goes almost entirely down the exact same road. That road is, first, High Street, or in Oxon parlance 'The High', the part of picturesque collegiate Oxford that is most accessible to the townie. It's a series of screens, perimeter walls with Gothic or baroque detail, containing the gateways to various colleges; the vertical punctuation as the street curves around, the spires and towers, are usually within those walls, not outside of them. It is not formal, however; retail buildings, often with cantilevered bay windows, are interspersed. Then you come to a roundabout, again in typically annoying Oxon parlance known as The Plain, and Cowley Road. Eventually, this road gets you to Blackbird Leys. But before it does, you watch

Oxford evaporating with great speed, being replaced first with a shabby-genteel Trustafarian enclave, then with 1930s suburbia of the most identikit kind. Cowley Road is long and not entirely straight, but the accidents of the free market have not managed to create something as interesting as the accidents of feudalism. It is a category error to lambast an arterial road for not resembling a central high street, but the difference is nonetheless sharp.

There's little worth noting on the Cowley Road, but for two colourful moments. A one-storey parade of takeaways has been decorated with lurid 'graf', of the day-glo sort you might get in Bristol – ergo, vibrancy. Opposite is East Oxford NHS Centre, designed by Hunter and Partners for PFI vultures Carillion. To get some idea of how low public and governmental esteem for architecture might be, the high status of the NHS (such that even attacks on it like Andrew Lansley's part-privatization bill have to be phrased as continuations or fulfilments rather than repudiations of it) has never really translated into decent NHS architecture. The mega-hospitals of the '60s were never, with a couple of exceptions, great works of design; their eventual successors in the 2000s even less so, due to the strictures of PFI. That's of course fine, if form follows function, but in East Oxford



Health Centre the design is clumsily gesturing for attention. If the bright blue render, Alsopian pilotis and bolted-on wood are standard New Labour-era components, the continuous wave of the roof set against the length and rectilinearity of the rest of the building is especially unfortunate. It was apparently completed in 2007, but there's a concrete mixer and a fenced-off area in the forecourt. Then there's a huge '30s cinema (now, like so many of them, an Evangelical church), and nothing thereafter of interest until you get to Templars Square.

Class and the Picturesque in Blackbird Leys

Cowley, if seen as an independent town (which it isn't, not even legally) has at its centre a place which is not awful, not disastrous, neither hideously ugly nor hideously dilapidated, but nonetheless particularly depressing. Templars Square houses the pound shops you don't get in Oxford proper, a bookie's, a New Look and a Co-op. In design terms, it has a vertical feature detailed in white tile, while the rest of it plumps for a brick-infill mild modernism. This being Oxford, it's often evoked with a shudder as some sort of monstrous carbuncle, but it's a lot less interesting than that. Low-rise council and private houses start to be supplanted by flats, Y-plan 1950s council flats, and then a bridge passes a freight railway, forming a very precise boundary. You could put a railway station here for Blackbird Leys, but curiously nobody has thought to do so. From the top deck of the aforementioned number 5 bus, you can see the panorama of the estate, low-rise but for two tall towers, and just beyond it, the remains of the Cowley car factories, most of which has been redeveloped as business parks, retail parks and such, leaving a relatively small BMW plant amidst the corporate headquarters and Vue Cinemas that occupy much of the rest of the space.

With a population of over 10,000, Blackbird Leys has been described as 'the largest council estate in Europe'. This is an implausible claim – to be larger than Gropiusstadt, the Paris *banlieue*, Marzahn or Ursynow, it'd have to be larger than Oxford itself – which mainly reflects Oxford's excessive belief in its own centrality; but the estate is definitely comparable to the places

mentioned above, for one very obvious reason. Blackbird Leys is a *banlieue*, perhaps the only one in England: a peripheral, single-class suburb at the edge of an overwhelmingly bourgeois city. Like Paris, and unlike, say, Leicester, East London or Birmingham, Oxford has incessantly been told how wonderful it is, and that wonderfulness is largely connected with having survived the Industrial Revolution unscathed, and hence unscathed by the presence of a working class. It did, especially from the 1910s after the foundation of Morris Cowley, acquire a classic industrial proletariat. Sooner or later, that had to be housed somewhere where the architectural and social effect would not be unsightly. Many of those who were moved to Blackbird Leys originally lived in the city centre, on the sites where the Westgate and the Oxford Ice Rink now stand. There could have been high-density housing here, like in the less 'historic' cities mentioned above; there could even have been the more conservative approach tried in Edinburgh, where traditionalist workers' housing was merged imperceptibly into the medieval fabric. Neither happened, and neither it seems was even considered.

What is Blackbird Leys like, however, as a piece of picturesque planning? That's not a facetious question. Although the need to get it done all at once means that the slow historical accretions of the High were impossible, the estate is very much an example of the 'picturesque', Festival of Britain-influenced moment in English modernism. There are no straight lines in the town plan, only winding streets, cul-de-sacs, even a proper Crescent. The two tower blocks seem mainly to be there for the same kind of vertical punctuation as the Gothic and baroque spires of the High, a way of injecting visual interest into what would otherwise be a pretty faceless low-rise sprawl. There's no bare concrete, and most of the housing – even, towers aside, the flats – has pitched roofs. There's a subtle use of colour, with terraces, semis and blocks of various sizes clad in rich dark weatherboarding or with pretty, crisp yellow and green spandrels to their windows. The scale of the blocks is often mixed up: from one spot there's a view of a single-storey terrace and a three-storey block of flats with red tiles and balconies, with one of the towers sandwiched between. These sort of juxtapositions were obviously not accidental, but

part of a plan. The spaces in between are badly maintained, with most of the blocks of flats (indeed most of what hasn't been snapped up with Right to Buy) left stained and dilapidated, but in and of themselves they're usually well-considered, with a lot of trees, a lot of green space, a lot of places where children could play, and where it could be pleasant to walk. So, other than the near-total lack of upkeep, why does Blackbird Leys feel so sad?

The decision to build a *banlieue* rather than inner-city estates meant that Oxford's architects had to design something resembling a small New Town. It suffers from the defects of most new towns, largely a fixation with keeping densities low and distances high, in order to avoid any suspicion of resembling the dense urban slums thrown up by the Industrial Revolution. All those green verges look quite nice, but they make the area feel suburban and wan, as does the street plan, endlessly winding and looping back on itself. These are not recipes for social breakdown or even mild ennui, as plenty of well-maintained low-density estates can attest. The problem is that given the uncertainty as to whether Blackbird Leys is a suburb, a new town or anything in particular, it has no centre. There's a sports hall, schools, a pub, a shopping parade, and not too far away the joys of Templars Square and myriad retail parks, but in terms of real amenity and activity, pickings are slim indeed. The estate used to have a rep for joyriding, and it's not terribly hard to see why. But lots of the frustrations and absences in Blackbird Leys must be a direct consequence of its role as a great container for the working class in Oxford. The people of Blackbird Leys themselves are fully aware of this.

Over the last few years they have elected councillors from the Independent Working Class Association, an outgrowth of anti-fascist street fighters Red Action which seems almost entirely localized in Blackbird Leys. Their politics are based on the concerns of working-class 'communities' in some unexpected ways. IWCA policies include organizing demonstrations against local drug dealers, community-based crackdowns on anti-social behaviour, and campaigning for the social facilities so conspicuously wanting in Blackbird Leys. Crime and the 'student left' are its great adversaries.¹² Interestingly, they never have a presence on national demonstrations, barely exist on the Internet, and have

received little press coverage or presence. They just build up their base in beleaguered working-class areas, seemingly regardless of the means chosen to achieve it. A sort of Independent Labour Party without the Christianity and the trade unionism, and without much socialism; but holding fast to the truth that the working class has no political representation in the twenty-first century, and that the consequences of this are dire. If anyone doubts it, put them on a number 5 bus and get them to look out of the window.



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Chapter Eleven

Leicester: Another Middle England

Floating in Space

Get on a bus in the centre of Leicester, and a fifteen-minute drive will take you to a place which conveys the argument of this book better than any other. Ask the driver to tell you when the bus arrives at the National Space Centre. The route goes through a pleasingly grand-scaled Midland city that is suddenly smashed to pieces by a vast flyover and becomes straggling suburbia at great speed, with semis and large red-brick factories scattered by wide roads. In the distance you will be able to see a blue, bubble-shaped tower. Get off here. Now, you're not far from the centre of town, but you're still in a suburbia which could conceivably go on like this for miles. Nicely proportioned council red-brick semis, lumpier private semis with big bay windows, tall chimneys in the near distance. The commingling of (mostly disused) industry with suburbia makes clear that this is the Midlands, not the North. Walk towards the bubble tower, and the semis are abruptly replaced with tight rows of terraces. Then turn past warehouses and metal sheds into the tellingly-named Exploration Drive, and have a good boggle.

The National Space Centre was built in 2001 to a design by Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, a 'high-tech' architect whose speciality is the application of light cladding to thin, tensile structures, an aesthetic that wants at once to be disposable and environmentally friendly. Grimshaw also designed what is probably the recent modern building most loved by the public at large, the Eden

Project in Cornwall, a *Silent Running*-cum-Buckminster Fuller experiment that is, helpfully, on a reservation in the countryside and hence removed from the everyday. The National Space Centre, as its surroundings make clear, is in as everyday a location as could be imagined, and by unassumingly placing space exploration in such a location, the Centre's sponsors and designers were continuing some kind of modernist project of inserting the extraordinary and strange into the quotidian. It's fun to see a sign pointing you to space next to a completely mundane row of terraced houses. It's also fun to see this bizarre, bulbous creation looming out from behind them. This might or might not be making the place unpopular. At any rate, the local nickname for the place is apparently the rather deflating 'the Maggot'.

The Maggot's towering size is dictated by its contents. There is a permanent exhibition on the space race and our continuing, if relatively paltry attempts to explore beyond our own planet – something that was dead topical in 2011, fifty years after Yuri Gagarin. You have to pay for the permanent exhibition, but helpfully, the most interesting exhibits for those who don't have much interest in interactive advertainment or those who aren't here with children are entirely public, just at the entrance to the Centre's café, so you can see them without paying a penny. Next to the place where you can get your fizzy drink is a Soyuz spacecraft, the only one on show to the public in Western Europe. The hammer and sickle and 'SSSR' are proudly displayed on the hull. The bubble-like shape was evidently an inspiration for the exterior, and how wonderful it is that Leicester has a tower based on the design of a Soyuz module! The module itself looks like it might have been a bit more claustrophobic, but nonetheless. Then, look up from here, and two rockets take up the tower's multi-storey height; a Blue Streak missile, raw and banal, and an American Thor missile, which like the Soyuz was more 'designed'. It's strange to be admiring the design of nuclear missiles, but apt, as therein lies the central contradiction in enthusiasm for the space race.

Apt also is the area around the National Space Centre. The Centre was lottery-funded, part of some overarching regeneration 'offer', but as so often it seems to have stalled half-way

through. The spectacular, signature museum is there, it got built, and here at least it's quite delightful. Very close to it, housing got built. Of what sort? A sign tells all. 'Abbey Meadows West' promises 'high-quality traditional housing', along with 'executive luxury housing' and a 'car showroom (pre-sold to Audi)'. That high-quality traditional housing is not traditional in form, since that would involve coherent streets, a regular layout, maybe even a grid plan; but it is traditional in aesthetic, in that each house is built from load-bearing brick, with a tiled roof. This series of cul-de-sacs within cul-de-sacs with abundant car parking and security features belongs to a tradition that dates back all the way to 1920s Southern California. It's as twentieth-century as a Soyuz spaceship. Nonetheless, the signifiers, which are important, are all telling you that this is your home, Englishman, and hence also your castle. Even the computer renders on the billboards have a faint misty patina to them, to make it all look extra wistful and dreamy. They're the product of volume housebuilders Bellway, who have a nice line in creepy advertisements. A mother and baby, with gleaming white skin of positively nuclear radiance. The advertisement is encouraging you to customize your home, with 'Bespoke Additions'.

These are the two poles. The executive, traditionalist estate, and the lottery-funded Space Centre. The time of the latter is over, the time of the former is now returning. In between is the part that neither New Labour nor the Tories have shown much interest in – industry, research and development, science. There are derelict factories nearby, their roofs smashed up to ensure that they can't be re-used. Then there's a massive stretch of overgrown scrubland, with another large sign announcing the Leicester Science Park, 'circa 3000 sq m of innovation business space'. Apparently it was supposed to commence in summer 2010, but in July 2011 there was no sign of any work on the site whatsoever. There's only wasteland separating the two forms of redevelopment. In between them is a story that is seldom told, where high-tech architects like Nicholas Grimshaw thought that they could mass-produce modernist housing on what Buckminster Fuller called 'spaceship earth', a form of housing as perfectly tailored to function and need, and as unashamed about technology

and modernity, as spacecraft. What happened instead was that volume housebuilders took up the mantle of mass production and created simulations of the old world, cranked and twisted so that all living space would be tailored to that other mass-produced, modern object, the car. So the outcome was that those high-tech architects designed special, upmarket, expensive cultural buildings, in which you could detect some faint trace of their earlier dreams of a total revolution in earthly space.

Up Against Orton Square

I purchased a return on the bus to the National Space Centre from Leicester Railway Station. I got on the same number bus to get back, but was told I couldn't use my return, despite the fact it was the same line, because *this* bus was run by a different operating company. If there's a better argument for the renationalization of our ridiculous, deregulated public transport than this, I haven't heard it. But get off that bus, after you've finished seething, and you'll find that Leicester is about as good as a medium-sized English city gets, with all of the best features and relatively few of its mistakes and frustrations, at least inside the ring road. Leicester has the highest non-white population of any British city outside London, and seems as unassuming about this as about everything else – and given that it doesn't have Birmingham's vastness and mass, or its status as 'Second City', its occasional provincialisms are much less infuriating. It has lots of the best things about northern cities – refusal of Good Taste, proper urban scale and civic pride, a great big covered market – without their tendency to blow their own trumpets with vehemence. It has far greater density of interesting twentieth- and twenty-first-century architecture than Birmingham, and can also lay claim to a couple of the most important modern buildings of the last hundred years. It doesn't trumpet this either, although perhaps it should. Nonetheless, if Leicester is mediocre, then there is some hope that we might be able to discover a decent, worthwhile mediocrity in English urbanism, rather than a lumpen, thuggish mediocrity.

First you have to get over a miserable prospect around the railway station. Hulking red-brick offices for the likes of KPMG

are detailed with lots of little pitched roofs and banded brickwork in an invariably inept attempt to convince you that they are not, in fact, stodgy, identikit and obnoxious but fabulously dynamic and contextual additions to the townscape. A dual carriageway runs inbetween. This feels like the banker belt on the Leeds ring road, or worse, Reading, but it's deceptive, and soon you find yourself in a bustling town centre, particularly rich in tasteless Victorian Grand Hotels, soft-porn Victorian monuments (check out 'Grief', near the Town Hall) and in fine early-twentieth-century architecture, usually at some midway point between the floridity of art nouveau and the more rectilinear grace of art deco. The Fenwick's store, part-glazed, with twisty iron balconies, is one case in point; another is the extremely strange Singer building, a long range with a barrel-vaulted glass roof, Egyptian columns, and various forms of Imperialist decorative dressing, from majolica ships and Union Jack panels to allegorical representations of the subject territories of Black Africa, Egypt, Burma and India. It was designed in 1904, during the Twilight of Empire, by one Arthur Wakerley, architect, Whig, and Mayor of Leicester. Many of Leicester's current residents would be right to regard this building with the same horror that many Varsovians reserve for Stalin's Palace of Culture and Science – an unaltered monument to imperial dominance and barbarism – but nobody seems bothered, and at the moment the structure is subdivided into a fitness centre, a karate school, a caff, a kebab shop and a nail parlour with an imperial transition encapsulated in its name, 'USA Nails'. The area around is pedestrianized, lined by skinny trees. Nearby is the similarly individual stone and glass tower of Lewis's department store, and several very enjoyably silly commercial buildings. Evidently, in Leicester, the fact that nobody was looking meant not third-rate copying of metropolitan models, but the welcome refusal of metropolitan good taste.

The ensemble that gives the best view of the pleasures of Leicester is, rather unexpectedly, a Cultural Quarter, centred on a square named after Joe Orton, the working-class queer playwright, who harboured very little affection for his birthplace (though what he might have thought of it now is an open question). It would be nice if, in light of many of the stranger



Leicester buildings, it was possible to point to an unbroken local tradition of peculiar and imaginative architecture, but instead, as usual, an icon provider was parachuted in. For once, though, the urban structure was so strong that the iconist – Uruguayan designer Rafael Vinoly – conformed to it rather than ignoring it. The area has a centrifugal, spiralling force which is exacerbated rather than broken by Vinoly’s Curve Theatre, a sweeping, but relatively simple and undemonstrative design from an architect more usually inclined to the showily egotistical. It’s perhaps a storey or so too tall, but it takes up well a rhythm that begins with the staggered, stepped curtain wall of a post-war office building, veering towards a Weimaresque Odeon cinema by Harry Weedon and then continuing down Rutland Street, where there is a cluster of fascinating ex-industrial buildings. In the other corner, a Serbian Orthodox church sits behind its churchyard. The industrial buildings of Rutland Street are well worth an exploration in themselves. One is an early 1920s replica of the Philadelphia Headquarters of the Pfister and Vogel leather company, boasting green tiles, wide, cubistic bay windows and art nouveau carvings. Terracotta warehouses just opposite make for a less strange, but still powerful and intriguing townscape. Inevitably, a couple have

been turned into luxury living solutions, but as Cultural Quarters go, this is significantly less dumb than most.

Markets, Marketing and Ornament

The Northernness of this Midland city can be gleaned from its vast complex of street markets, which introduces a welcome note of chaos and bustle and a working-class presence into a city which, you soon find, has tried to stake as much on big retail as everywhere else. Walking round Leicester's market, you ask yourself how long this place can possibly last – how long it will be allowed to occupy space which could so much more profitably be operated by mall developers like Hammersons or LendLease. There are really several markets, one enormous, practically medieval covered market that has escaped from fourteenth-century Flanders, and a red-brick, modernist affair, also covered, with complex multiple layers inside. It all manages to slant the city centre into something a great deal more genuinely lively, less segregated and tight-arsed, than its equivalents in more *dirigiste*, developer-centred cities such as Birmingham. You can find second-hand bookshops here of a quality more common in Glasgow and London, and that's a reason to cheer loudly. Not that Leicester doesn't share the country-wide belief that a huge John Lewis and lots of car parking are the answer to industrial decline, but here, again rather surprisingly, the results have been treated, sometimes, with a degree of architectural seriousness. So there is a lot of shopping, but in some compelling, if problematic, buildings.

Most interesting is the Haymarket Centre, an early 1970s scheme by BDP in their vigorous, red-brick, socialist prime. The façades of the shopping centre and the car park are deceptively simple, long rectilinear stretches of sleek red brickwork, with a hint of 1920s Dutch Modernism. So far, so much like a superior, but nonetheless functionally similar post-war mall, a slab of 'comprehensive redevelopment'. Yet on the other side it resolves into a different building entirely. The stair towers become sharp corner compositions, and the brick range extends into tall, thin pillars. The angular geometry of a stairway to an upper storey

emerges at one end, a cantilevered block at another, while shops and cafés take up the ground floor, backing away to form a public square. A constructivist sculpture by Hubert Dalwood, a slightly anthropomorphic alignment of metal panels, occupies part of the square. This is the point where the Haymarket Centre becomes the Haymarket Theatre, an extremely unusual mixed usage for its period. It's a great building, fitting in with the general sense of doing very clever and unusual things in an unassuming, relaxed way. It also has the feeling of being severely down-at-heel, a location for loitering and street drinking, although that's better than the ruthless cleansing of such activities that would take place in the Business Improvement District of Birmingham. The reason for its slight sadness is that the Theatre itself has moved lock, stock and barrel to the Cultural Quarter, to the new shiny regeneration theatre. Evidently a city of 300,000 couldn't accommodate *two* theatres. It's interesting that culture now has to be zoned, put in a reservation, rather than placed in the centre of the everyday. At the time of writing, it has been standing abandoned for five years.

Walk through here and you find that the city has managed to create a bustling, pedestrianized centre without the same sense of yuppie reservation as many similar cities, although perhaps that's not for want of trying. The unusually decent architecture extends even to that grimmest of styles – '80s vernacular – as where a white weatherboarded clock tower *en piloti* marks an entrance to a little simulation of medieval bustle, and manages to pull it off. Like the Haymarket Theatre, it's very red-brick and very Midlands. The inverse approach to this is the Highcross Centre, Leicester's big-bucks, money-spinning megamall, the one with a big John Lewis in it, the one that necessitates the big horrible ring road to convey suburban shoppers into it. Here, developers Hammerson brought in another firm of signature architects, the Koolhaas-trained Foreign Office Architects, who were in the early 2000s considered faintly *avant-garde*, unlike the usual shopping mall grunts such as Chapman Taylor or Benoy. However, Hammerson's choice had a certain logic to it. They hadn't just picked them out because they liked an iconic building they saw in the papers. FOA (who split a couple of years ago due to the

break-up of the extra-professional partnership of the two lead architects, Farshid Moussavi and Alejandro Zaera-Polo) were enthusiasts for ornament and cladding, and the concentration of architectural energies on the dressing of façades; Moussavi wrote a treatise on ornament, a strikingly non-modernist move. FOA's use of ornament was not traditionalist, in the clumsy '80s post-modernist fashion, but heavily theorized and non-referential. The point remains, though, that they were architects who would let the mall's developers do pretty much whatever they liked with the shopping centre typology, with its vast eating of space, its enclosed, air-conditioned interiors and its abundant car parking, and would then model the result in an attractive, and reliably 'iconic', way. It's the architectural equivalent to our economic hurtle back to the nineteenth century, where the architect provided a tectonic frock for engineering.

FOA's section of Highcross – a vast structure based on continuous accretions, one of several similarities between malls and cathedrals – is Shire West, at the mall's northern edge. A standard double-height space is slightly 'humanized' via top-lighting and a bit of wood, but a bridge to the John Lewis marks the real join. This bridge is a buckle of inclined steel, leading to a very large glass box dressed in a flowing, organic pattern, apparently taken from one of John Lewis's old catalogues. Arts and Crafts, but with all that pesky stuff about the dignity of labour taken out. It is, undoubtedly, a little more aesthetically interesting than the average mall, especially from the street, where that dashing bridge glistens into the department-store box; but it still feels like an abdication from architecture's other role as something that consciously encloses and creates space and location. It's always sad and funny, when Fabians and (non-neo) Liberals talk of creating an employee-owned 'John Lewis capitalism', to recall the vicious damage that John Lewis have perpetrated upon British cities over the last two decades, their prestigious presence always necessitating overwhelming, car-centred retail hangars, usually as part of shopping malls. Not all of FOA's intervention is the department store, though – there's also a multiplex cinema. This is usually a windowless, big-shed typology, and FOA of course don't try to change that – instead, they cast the box in shining zinc

panels. Silvery metal is a much more predictable form of Urban Regen architecture, and as with the John Lewis, the effect is aspirational in a slightly fur-coat-and-no-knickers way, and equally tacky-exciting. Then, if you get back onto street level, you find yourself in a more mundane area of the ‘Highcross Quarter’, wood and brick-clad buildings lining public squares. While the market pulses with life, this place sits completely empty on a bright July afternoon, the bottles of ketchup and the glass pepper grinders left lonely on the outside tables.

‘Elite, not Elitist’

Leicester University is not a member of the Russell Group, the elite cabal that dominates the university system and which now has the right to set astonishingly high fees, but it’s one of the most successful universities not to be part of it. Unlike the other colleges in industrial towns in this book – the University of Teesside, say, or the University of Plymouth – Leicester’s University is well aware of its power and prestige. To reach it, I walked from the dual carriageway onto a little square, with a hilariously vulgar statue of a Victorian notable, the dissenting minister and writer Robert Hall. His robust figure raises a hand, into which (surely) a student has inserted a crushed beer can and a dangling binbag. A more multicultural monument stands next to him, a rare permanent homage to Leicester’s impressive diversity – the word ‘tranquillity’ translated into German, Welsh and Urdu, amongst others. Victoria Park takes up a wide stretch of this area, an amenity centred around a puzzling, severe First World War monument designed by Edwin Lutyens, an uncanny presence, using the classical language with what was even then an unusual lack of cliché. There’s a close of Arts and Crafts cottages next to a fire station, strictly private property, but worth a peek.

As you walk around admiring all this, however, you’re desperately trying to avoid looking at a much larger structure – Opal Court, a clustered tower of student housing. Like many towers of student housing, it is erected from prefabricated modules. This is not always a route to a horrible building, but it is when the architects – here, Stephen George & Partners – stretch every sinew

to stop that modularity and regularity from becoming visible on the façade, which is important so that the students' parents don't think they're sending their kids to live in a tower block. The whole 2000s panoply was thrown at it – a stepped, irregular skyline, thin stock-brick cladding, blue plastic cladding, 'high-tech' struts protruding at random, and several of those wavy roofs – in the attempt to hide the sheer bloody size of the thing. At its full stretch, it's twenty-three bays wide and sixteen storeys high – an enormous building. The only way to design something of this mass and to make it viable is to accept that you've built a gigantic block, rather than this ridiculous fudge. It's one of the first things you see on the train into Leicester, which is deeply unfair to the city. In the years just before the crash, several of these (none quite so appalling, but near enough) appeared around Leicester, as if in a bid to offset whatever efforts at coherence and thoughtfulness it had made in the centre.

So the best thing to do at this point is go straight into the University, and look at three buildings which, whatever else can be said about them, are towers that were closely pondered, conceived from start to finish as entities that could be seen for miles, and which hence had to offer something other than patronizing platitudes or monolithic blandness to the eye. These three towers can be seen from Victoria Park, where they suggest a tiny modernist city of greater design interest than most actual cities. They are the Charles Wilson building, designed by Denys Lasdun; the Attenborough Tower, by Arup; and the Engineering Building, by James Stirling and James Gowan. The Charles Wilson building, built in 1963, houses various bits and bobs from common rooms to cafés. Like all three of these towers, it's complex, its different parts articulated and emphasized, but not as in the artificial cladding of Blair hats and slatted wood: the articulation springs from the inside of the building, grows out of its internal forces. The Charles Wilson building has six lower-rise floors that are wide and stark, then a thinner tower, with a sculptural fire escape placed at a corner – probably more to create a constructivist dash than to facilitate easy escape from fire. It's as ornamental as the John Lewis, perhaps, but how much more tectonically vigorous and powerful! It has the wilful sculptural play of a Frank Lloyd

Wright conveyed through a more dour, northern sensibility, in well-detailed, smooth brown concrete. The 1969 Attenborough Tower, for the Arts and Humanities Department, rises from a long and low podium up to eighteen storeys. It's prefabricated, a simple matter of precast concrete modules, subtly curved, with dozens of identical windows, at an incline from top to bottom. It doesn't hide its height, it doesn't hide its method of construction, and it feels far more humane as a statement – its shape distinctive and attractive, futuristic and slightly kitsch, with zoom curves and angles. So the walk from Opal Court to here is a good place to convert doubters of the rightness in the modernist cause; but at the centre of it all is a building which is often considered to have broken apart all the certainties and theories of modernism as it had been practised until then.

Stirling and Gowan's Engineering Building is a banner for an Anglicized modernism that horrified Nikolaus Pevsner, one which drew on constructivism, expressionism, and the baleful, twisted forms of the industrial revolution. It's several weird and angular little things, crammed onto a tiny site, a glazed engineering block and a tower put through all kinds of cantilevers, twists and turns in order to use its space. As anyone interested in twentieth-century architecture will know, it forms an enduringly photogenic ensemble, the tower rising sleek, on skinny concrete stilts, above a cantilevered lecture theatre; a series of sculptural shapes clad in mass-produced red tiles, above a red-brick base. Unlike much of what had gone before it, the Engineering Building did not sweep up its functions into a clear, transparent envelope, but splayed them out crankily and gawkily, mocking the Apollonian rationalism of 'High Modernism' as it went. In photographs, like all Stirling's 'red' buildings, it crackles with electricity, but what is peculiar about the Engineering Building is that, unlike many of its antecedents, it doesn't have much in the way of physical presence. Unlike the heavy concrete Brutalism of late Le Corbusier, or of followers such as Denys Lasdun, the materials are lightweight, deliberately so.

The tiles have none of the physical heft of the red brick that they evoke from a distance. Rather than overwhelm, or carry you along with it, the Engineering Building encourages the same sort



of rapt, fascinated, but essentially cold gaze you might direct at the intricacies of a Swiss watch, a clockwork toy, a Geometric drawing, or a Van Doesburg painting. As much as the work of Lutyens, helpfully just round the corner, it's an architecture of allusion, paradox and puzzlement. There are so many possible angles, views and positions, all of which show something surprising and strange: under the lecture theatre, looking towards the smaller of the two towers, with its thin, louvred windows broken up by a curved red mass; the engineering laboratories from round the back, when their faceted, diagonally placed diamonds peek out above nondescript neo-Georgian buildings; under the stilts of the taller tower, where a glass tube contains an exterior staircase; from a distance, where you can survey the whole ensemble. All this has been extensively documented and photographed in dozens of books, yet it still feels like a surprise to discover in Leicester, even in a University this pleased with itself. It could be argued that the work ended an architecture of physicality and replaced it with an architecture of built theory, which has had certain dire consequences – but if so, what a magnificent dead end this is.

This superb mini-city has its lower-rise buildings, most of a

high quality, across podiums and walkways, but there's something that rankles, and it's made explicit by the banners of the University, those adverts fluttering in the wind. 'Ranked in the top 2% of Universities worldwide'; 'Elite, not Elitist'. The latter is one of the pithiest statements of neoliberal English cultural ideology I've ever heard. Elite? Of course it's Elite, we're obviously a ruling class. But we're not Elitist. We're just the same as you, and hey, we probably had the same opportunities as you, but you just didn't take them. We won't ever suggest we're better or smarter than you, and good God, we certainly won't try and bring you culture, or knowledge. That would be awfully patronizing of us. We'll rule over you, but we won't be overbearing, or least of all, paternalistic about it. There's a consequence to this, and that's the stretch of wasteland in between the National Space Centre and the Abbey Meadows housing, where all that research and development was supposed to meet working-class Leicester. The contrast between the Space Centre and the neo-Georgian rabbit hutches, too, is a consequence. We'll explore space, you'll live in the eighteenth century, with better car parking.



Chapter Twelve

Lincoln: Between Two Cathedrals

A Googie Tent in Ermine

As has already been implied, there exists a different kind of ‘city’ in the UK from those catalogued in this book. The Cathedral City is an entirely different genre, and one which I’m trying to avoid. Not because they’re uninteresting – the panoramic view of Winchester from St Catherine’s Hill is not to be sniffed at, however self-satisfied it might be down below – but because they don’t need the extra attention. Nobody needs convincing of their merits. Excepting the handful of former Cathedral Cities that have accommodated later development and become modern conurbations – Bristol, London, Glasgow – they are a pleasant but over-favoured adjunct to the places where most of us actually live. They have largely stayed within or nearly within their medieval walls or been wound into the tightest of green belts, becoming packed with cottagey retail and branches of the curious mock-antique chain store Past Times. They’re places to visit, not places to live, unless you’re either lucky or a venture capitalist. Lincoln, you learn after a couple of hours walking here, is interesting because it fits neither model. It isn’t a Wen that still retains a Cathedral in the middle of it somewhere, like Bristol, and it isn’t an inhabited museum piece, like Canterbury. In fact, Lincoln has some qualities that are lacking in most British cities. It’s something of a well-kept secret, a medium-sized industrial town that didn’t barbarize its built environment, a Cathedral City that excelled in post-war modernist architecture.

Walking round it entails having your preconceptions knocked down, one by one.

I wasn't in Lincoln to write about it, but to attend a conference on the history and aesthetics of council housing, which took place in the Christian educational institution Bishop Grosseteste College, just next to the Ermine Estate – a very large public housing project mostly built between 1952 and 1958. One of the organizers had grown up here; in the course of the event it was an eye-opener to find so many modernist enthusiasts and concrete fetishists who had grown up in places like this. The reason why the conference was here, by the Ermine Estate, was partly because the place is a very typical example of its kind, but also because of the building at its heart. The culmination of the event was a visit to St John the Baptist, a 1963 church by a local architect, Sam Scorer. Around it the estate twists its winding roads, and various different eras in social democratic design can be picked out and compared. The main shopping parade is 'Festival style', the jolly, ornamented modernism that emerged out of the 1951 Festival of Britain, as seen at the Lansbury Estate in Poplar – a curved block with little bow windows that evoke a fishing village or a seaside town, a curious sight after the featureless steppe of the nearby Lincolnshire countryside. The houses and flats are all uncontroversial but decent, often with well-trimmed and maintained public greenery around; the streets were covered in blossom on the day I visited. There's an elegant little public library right in the centre of the place, with its rooms at jagged angles to pick up light. I have seen very few council estates in such good condition, but that doesn't prepare one for the sight of St John the Baptist. The estate is determinedly mild and moderate, far from the avant-garde; its parish church is quite the opposite.

St John the Baptist is a Googie building. This architectural genre, begun by the Californian architect John Lautner in the late 1940s, is modernism on the razzle, a completely anti-functional play of swooping engineering, space-age ornamentation and the aesthetically productive futurist illusion that a static building is a moving, active thing. Sam Scorer was from an affluent Lincolnshire family, and yet there are few modernist buildings in working-class areas so completely devoid of condescension.

This building is a matter of pure pleasure, unrestrained delight, play for the senses. The exterior is grey, which at least conforms slightly more to austere type, but what the eye notices is the form, the way that the hyperbolic paraboloid roof plunges down and up the glass and concrete walls. From the outside, it's a curio; inside, it's a masterpiece, completely out on its own in the UK. That roof is detailed in delicate stretches of wood, miming an 'upturned ark' effect that may not be entirely intended. The pews run in a semi-circle round the altar, feeling tightly packed and warm, but also very small – the church commissioners of the early 1960s were evidently taking a realistic view of likely attendances. The architectural form embraces striking artistic interventions.

The sculptures and fittings are modernist: a concrete altar, a semi-abstract crushed steel Roman centurion by Charles Edward Sansbury standing guard over the crucifixion, deep red plush benches just behind, and a buckled, skinny cross that evokes Giacometti. But at first you don't notice any of this – it's the space around the altar itself which simply astonishes. The coloured glass of the vast window, by Keith New, is loud and bright. It claims to represent, in a non-representational way, 'the Revelation of God's Plan for Man's Redemption', but that wild agglomeration of colour and shape has no hint of determinism. What it conveys is a complex but unmediated sense of joy, as your eye runs over a series of brash scarlets, greens, yellows and blues. The church's unusually useful guide tells you that 'the central section, dominated by a large crimson shape, represents the Holy Trinity', and 'the shape on the right with a largely green background represents the nativity of Christ'. As with a piece of conceptual art, the 'intention' is only obvious if you read a guide, if someone's telling you what to see, but it doesn't matter in the slightest – a 'plan' is visible, as is 'redemption', and the theology behind it is unclear enough to be ignored by the non-believer of whatever stripe. The absence of any darkness, any crepuscular gloom, any images of pain or tribulation, makes this a church that seemingly has no fetish for suffering – at least until you look more closely at the smaller fittings, more 'normal' christs and virgins donated by parishioners. Atheists longing for the warmth and ritual of religion could console themselves with the thought that St John the

Baptist's conveys a civic joy, a pleasure in architectural form and assembled community, that doesn't *necessarily* require religious belief.

From the Steep Hill to Siemens

There is a more famous religious building in Lincoln. After a journey through streets of affluent, leafy villas, the Cathedral Square is choked by traffic, mostly very large vehicles – not an encouraging sign. The houses on the square are perhaps excessively pretty, restored to within an inch of their lives, but the Cathedral itself is furious, undeniable. I approached it from the back, admiring the monsters and the superbly inhuman scale of the buttresses. The front façade is of similarly outrageous proportions, and inside, it's impossible not to gasp. They knew what they were doing. Walking round the aisles, I noticed sat on the pews several architects and historians who had been at the conference on council estates. This is not nearly as peculiar as it may at first appear. Modernism, at its extremes, on its Brutalist or expressionist edges, is an architecture of outlandish scale, capacious vaults, audacious structural engineering, stark games with length and repetition, light and shade, a willingness to court absurdity, and, frankly, a tendency to the frightening and sublime. Regularity, neatness, order and 'context' were to be shunned, as the assumption – as with, say, Park Hill in Sheffield – was that this would be the city's peak, the *Stadtkrone*, the pivotal monument for the entire area, visible for miles. Here, with similar autonomy and excess, the glory and fear of God was the object, however much you might today admire this place as the embodiment of human potential, and feel elated and uplifted by the engineering, care and craftsmanship rather than the devotion. The question that could be posed at Brutalism was perhaps: who was frightened, and who was doing the frightening? Obviously, much in Lincoln Cathedral is admirable for wholly un-Brutalist qualities such as intricate ornament, and I lack the language or belief to truly understand this structure, to do it any real justice, to be much other than awed by it. Undoubtedly it is, however, the centre of a topographical masterpiece.



When you look out of the gateways that lead to the Cathedral, you can see bulging, leaning non-mock Tudor, cobbles and tea shops. At the junction with Castle Hill begins the usefully named Steep Hill, thoroughly restored and cutesified. But although there's an enormous amount of architectural (and not merely archaeological) interest in these medieval, Tudor and Georgian houses tumbling down the slope, it's the slow transition that starts here that is especially unusual and compelling. Already from Steep Hill you can see long industrial sheds in the distance, across the flatlands; but as you descend from here to the main shopping street, you find that this gorgeous chocolate-box Lincoln has shifted, at first almost imperceptibly and then decisively, into a small but confident East Midlands industrial town. There are Victorian buildings, with wide expanses of glass and terracotta ornament, and there are post-war modernist buildings of an unexpected tact and conviction. There are tasteless 1980s postmodernist shopping centres, there is kitschy Blairite public art, and there are residential tower blocks in the near distance. Traces of Lincoln's previous existence are thrilling when interleaved with this mundane melange. The inhabited sixteenth-century High Bridge is a timber-framed block, clearly wilting with its own weight. Walk up a tiny stairway next to it,

and you find yourself in somewhere roughly functionalist, with what looks like a Victorian warehouse and the back-end of a mall abutting the Bridge and the waterway beneath.

The other route along the river Witham foregrounds the aforementioned Blairite sculpture, a ridiculous 2002 piece entitled 'Empowerment' (of course it is!), in which two steel figures tumble towards each other in a manner evoking now-forgotten early '90s cybersex film *The Lawnmower Man*. It was designed by one Stephen Broadbent and funded by the local Siemens factory, an unusually direct example of industrial patronage. Further down this long high street, there is the Market, the neoclassical portico of the Corn Exchange, and next to this two modern buildings. One is a quasi-Brutalist block, all rough concrete and red brick, the other a Miesian smoked-glass bank of patrician elegance. Both have the exact same scale as the earlier buildings, but make no concessions to 'in keeping'. Other towns such as Bristol, much larger and much richer than Lincoln, so often lack this unassuming kind of modernism; perhaps because talent cost money, or because it went unrecognized, or perhaps because there was simply less talent locally; or simply because Lincoln's ruling class actually *liked* their city. It later transpires that the Miesian bank is another Sam Scorer building – similarly American in derivation, but otherwise most unlike St John the Baptist's glorious display. The style for the job. Right at the end of the high street, where it meets the dual carriageway and railway station, the change is complete. The blue sheds of the Siemens works, a concrete viaduct and the intense red brick of the Bus Station are the monuments of a completely different city to that of Steep Hill – a ragged-arsed Midlands engineering town that could never adorn a postcard or a biscuit tin. Yet the transition between the two has been gradual and careful, and the city stayed coherent. It's a class city, like any other – but somehow the contradictions have been managed, smoothed over, and the city somehow retained its self-worth. This is no small thing.

The University of Lincoln (on Strike)

Brayford Pool, the city's old docks, is where much new development has been centred in recent years, following the reliable rule that an urban waterway means Old Corruption can't be too far away. There is much in the way of 'stunning developments', and here also is the only really awful building I saw in Lincoln (this is not faint praise, as most cities this size have several dozen): a grim exurban Odeon multiplex. It's huge, and destructive, and it's especially terrible because here at Brayford Pool is where you turn around and take in the view of the city, and realize its full magnificence – the Cathedral and the Castle erupting out of the landscape like rock formations. Even here, though, there has been some intelligence – fast-food chains Nando's and Prezzo are in another Sam Scorer structure, once more showing the architect in his Googie moment, with another hyperbolic paraboloid roof, but this time thinner, more of a self-display. It was built as a car showroom, then became – oh yes – a library, before reaching its current terminus serving foodstuffs. This is a lively embankment, and the reason for this is soon apparent – the University of Lincoln has its new campus here.



This is also the reason for some drably generic student flats, but the presence of an inner-city university may help explain exactly why Lincoln feels peculiarly optimistic. The University buildings are nothing to shout about, neomodernism of a reasonably inoffensive stamp – rendered concrete, a few dashes of blocky colour, tacked-on aluminium for the walkways – but there is much, much worse elsewhere. They’re also deathly quiet, considering the proximity of the dining and drinking on the other side of the Pool. This is because of the one-day strike affecting the Universities. Bishop Grosseteste College, run by the church, is shielded from the cuts, but the organizers of the council-housing conference asked for and got official UCU permission to run it, entirely due to its subject matter. The emptiness of the University itself suggests the strike has been solid.

Nonetheless, this sudden quietness is interesting. Given the enormous hike in tuition fees, the shot in the arm the University has evidently given the city may turn out to be brief. It was one of the possible explanations for why Lincoln feels, almost, in topographers Adrian Jones and Chris Matthews’ words, to be a ‘success story’. I didn’t set out to write about Lincoln. The favourable impression the city made on me had nothing to do with two reportedly excellent new buildings, *The Collection* by Panter Hudspith and Bauman Lyons’s *The Terrace*, as I didn’t know they were there. I hadn’t even realized there was a castle until I’d seen it in the distance. Lincoln isn’t perfect – the malls and public art are poor, and the public transport is very poor indeed, something that is sure to be radically exacerbated if, as planned, the bus station is demolished and replaced with another mall. Its industries are not what they were, so it’s likely that Lincoln has many of the same problems and inequalities as anywhere else in the UK, although it hides them better than most. But on the way back from Lincoln, I was mainly wondering how it had managed to be as good as it is. An expression of the paternalism of the bourgeoisie uphill towards the workers downhill? A consequence of the geographical position, away from the orgiastic speculation of the South and the please-developers-please desperation of much of the North and the West Midlands? The compact size, discouraging the ‘aspirational’ urge to become a ‘destination’? Lying off the

LINCOLN

main lines to London? Maybe the specificity of Lincoln means it has few lessons to impart, but one of these might be – self-esteem, without self-delusion.



Chapter Thirteen

The Valleys: I Am a Pioneer, They Call Me Primitive

Add Another Kick, Why Don't You

'South Wales needs a Plan!' declared a book published during the Great Depression, on one of the 'distressed areas' hardest hit by the 1930s. The cities of South Wales – Cardiff, Newport, Swansea – became boom towns in the late nineteenth century solely in order to export and process the produce of the coal seams that ran across the valleys; dependent on the tiny industrial towns that were hastily built to service them. This place powered the Industrial Revolution and imperial expansion more, perhaps, than any other, but that doesn't seem to have done it any favours. Now, in 2011, it seems that the Valleys need a Plan again; among the places most affected by the recession are the likes of Merthyr Tydfil, which face some of the highest rates of unemployment in the country; Merthyr is according to a report by the GMB the most difficult place to find work in the UK. The same places have been punished, in the exact same ways, yet again. The scarily ingenuous Iain Duncan Smith helpfully suggested that the people of Merthyr up sticks to Cardiff, where there are nine unemployed people for every job vacancy. The Valleys are at least topical. If the 2010s are not so much the return of the 1980s as a high-tech re-run of the 1930s, with a heavy slump and a National Government, then it makes sense that the Valleys have once more become a pejorative.

But does it make sense to include the Valleys in a book on 'Urban Britain'? They don't fit the pattern of any other rural or

urban settlement in the UK. These long rows of terraces, distributed along steep, scarred and verdant hills, are obviously too dense and industrial to be ‘the countryside’, no matter how gorgeously they might nestle in those undulations; at the same time they’re largely too bounded to feel like towns as commonly understood. They could be considered one dispersed great town, parted by billowing waves of topography. You’d have to be either very fit or very poor to attempt to negotiate it without a car, but thankfully I had a local friend who was willing. Linking the Valleys together coherently could only work via expensive, unwieldy solutions – an underground railway, a system of funiculars. Although unemployment is very high and the poverty is glaring, some moderate investment has made its way here. Since the mines were crushed in the 1980s, with the steelworks gradually following suit, call centres and local government offices filled the gap; talk of remaking them into Silicon Valleys seems to have come to little.

Self-conscious architecture, especially of the twentieth century, hasn’t touched the Valleys much, although there are remarkable buildings and townscapes to be found. The Valleys are so heart-stoppingly beautiful in places that you could imagine them one day becoming tourist centres, places to get a Second Home. Tragically enough, the destruction of the area’s industry has helped in this; the slag heaps have long since greened over and these man-made ridges amplify the already abundant curves and dips of the natural landscape. Snobbery is surely the main factor that checks the appearance in the *Guardian* of ‘Let’s move to ... Tredegar’, although on some level it’s their loss. What the Valleys does have is a great tradition of resistance, self-organization and militancy. Those who like to imagine that Communism was a middle-class phenomenon, fit only to be reminisced over by comedians and novelists whose parents were Party members, may need to be reminded that one of the CPGB’s founding organizations was the South Wales Socialist Society, most of whose members were Syndicalist Miners. Local councils in some of these towns were left-of-labour strongholds right up until the 1980s, as with Maerdy and its Communist Mayor, Annie Powell. There are still constituencies here where the Communist

Party gets placed ahead of the Conservatives – they even have a councillor in Penderyn. Blaenau Gwent, Nye Bevan’s old constituency, voted in dissident Labour candidates as MPs in the 2001 and 2005 elections, against Millbank-imposed Blairites. A local party founded from these Labourite refuseniks, Blaenau Gwent People’s Voice, looked briefly as though it might be the start of something important. South Wales had, after all, done something similar before. But the imminence of a Tory government caused a return to the fold in 2010, with a huge swing to Labour; like most left-of-Labour parties (Respect, the Scottish Socialist Party), People’s Voice has since disintegrated entirely. Still, at least some signs of this history should surely be visible.

London, Shanghai, Tokyo? Nope

The Valleys’ geographical stretch, right through the counties of Gwent and Glamorgan, was limited by time, for us, to two county boroughs, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Blaenau Gwent, the two main concentrations, with a little addenda on Newport thrown in. That’s because my gateway to the Valleys here, though not part of the Valleys proper, was Newport: a city which has a great prospect as you approach its railway station, almost like a mini-Newcastle. There’s a march of bridges, from multicoloured Victorian ironwork to a couple of white-steel regen efforts, ending with a majestic, almost ethereal Transporter; to the other side, a Town Hall tower, multi-storey car parks and tall office blocks, with a ruined castle in the middle. Newport station itself has had a bit of a go at providing a suitably impressive entry point. The earlier Great Western Railway station’s platforms have an advert on them illustrating a building you haven’t yet met, seen from the air, with the query: ‘London, Shanghai, Tokyo? Nope – Newport.’ It’s iconic! The building itself, designed by engineers Atkins, with some input from architect Nicholas Grimshaw, is a very mixed bag. It’s a vaguely cylindrical, blob-like form, linked by sweeping pedestrian bridges, with new platform pavilions in glazed blue tiles. The detailing is horribly tinny, a PFI-standard use of cheap metals, off-the-peg railings and tacky plastics, while the circulation is needlessly complicated; but there’s a germ of an

idea in there to give the place some sense of arrival, at least in the circular booking hall.

It sounds trite and obvious, but the foreignness of Wales to the English eye is only really apparent when you get out of the cities and into the valley, and even more so when you're in the mountains. You slowly realize that the place's history has been formed absolutely by its topography, with the Brecon Beacons forming an impassable barrier against the raids of barbarian German tribes, and the Valleys' shapes dictating an entire pattern of settlement, after coal and ore was discovered. The hills and mountains here are captivating and strange – long, deep in their curves, with velvety contrasts of dark and light greens. The first town we come to is Aberfan, whose tightly packed terraces swarming up hillsides introduce the scene – an urban-rural landscape, of great density mingled with great swathes of green space, with precipitously settled terraces.

Normally, when you see a landscape like this, in Brecon, say, which we made a detour to later, you expect tea shops, nice restaurants, a generally genteel and slightly geriatric atmosphere. Here, you find much the same kebab and chicken shops, bookies, pubs and newsagents that you'd find in any large city, which takes a while to get used to. While Aberfan's shops might feel familiar, the landscape is anything but. Those long lines of terraces are mirrored in the linear strip of gravestones to commemorate the children killed by a landslide of coalfield waste in 1966, who were further insulted by government inaction and obstruction. It's an early warning not to romanticize the Valleys' industrial past, a reminder that any nostalgia for the mining era could be dangerously rose-tinted. These people were treated brutally by their 'superiors'; their socialism didn't come out of thin air. As the deaths in unregulated pits in late 2011 made clear, that contempt for human life hasn't changed.

The Merthyr Tydfil Café Quarter

From there, we travel to the largest of the Valleys settlements, once the largest town outright in Wales, before the ports overtook it – Merthyr Tydfil, another place full of meanings and

resonances. It has been a recent punchbag for Conservative politicians owing to its large quantity of people on benefits, including incapacity benefits (now why on earth would an ex-mining area have a lot of claimants for *that*?) The Red Flag, as a political symbol, was born here, in the Merthyr Rising of 1831. It would have been nice for this to have been commemorated in the public art that is invariably scattered around a post-industrial town, but there is at least a very appropriate welded metal sculpture by Charles Sansbury (whom we have already encountered in St John the Baptist, Lincoln) marking the entrance to the town. It's placed on a roundabout. Sharp, severe, beautiful in its harshness, it is very Merthyr. Opposite are offices for the Welsh Assembly: a business-park monster, an utter architectural nullity, but surely deeply welcome for the town itself. Next to the roundabout is the town's only tower block. It's similarly bland as architecture, just a big brown block, but it's notable both for being one of the more urbes-in-rure towers in the UK, and for commanding one of the finest views conceivable, for what is no doubt a knock-down price. After that, we get out and have a wander around. The poverty of the town fairly whacks you in the face, especially in the haggard concrete shopping precinct of St Tydfil, which feels bizarrely dense, dark and compacted for such a small town surrounded by such lush green hills.

At least it's not entirely derelict. Walk round the residential areas just outside the town centre, and the public buildings are in a state of advanced decay. The Miners Hall of 1921 is a rough, late Gothic structure that looks more like a church than a workers' institute. Without a roof or any glass in the windows, overtaken by greenery, it's a sad spectacle indeed. Just round the corner is an actual church, the 1901 Unitarian, which is slotted into a line of terraces, with an entrance arcade level with the houses' doorways and the rest slightly set back – a great model for a public building, insinuating itself into the area while making no aesthetic concessions to it. It's also a very strange design by E. A. Johnson, a freestyle red-brick industrial Gothic with stepped, jagged buttresses. This too is long derelict, with its spiky silhouette made even more wild by the overgrowth. Finally, just in between these is an even stranger building, an exceptionally unusual structure



in any context – a synagogue, built in the 1870s, according to Pevsner (who cannot name the architect), the oldest purpose-built synagogue in Wales. It terminates the street abruptly, with high hills and trees just behind. There are three pointed towers, with a timber roof thrown arbitrarily between them, the symmetrical composition full with a compulsive upwards motion. Some of the windows are Gothic, some look like the windows of tenements. Long since disused by the town’s Jewish residents, it had a spell as a health centre, but is empty and part boarded-up on the day we visit; a purple sign reading ‘AUCTIONS’ is slapped on it.

What complicates this picture of dereliction and decline is the spruceness of the houses themselves. It looks like Merthyr Tydfil’s residents care for their area more than is common in the south-east of England. The terraces are spick, span and colourfully painted, rising up the slopes in parallel lines in a manner that makes me think inescapably of Brighton, absurd a comparison as that is. There’s civic pride here, even if there isn’t enough to keep all of the civic buildings open. At the town’s centre is a gigantic Tesco, which from a hill looks exactly like the steelworks a supermarket inadequately replaces as generator of employment. A walk round here will unearth at least one recent building of some quality; a fish and chip shop, of all things, the Busy Bee Fish Bar & Café next to the optimistic Tourist Information Centre, is

not half bad – a wood and metal pavilion with a big gabled roof that has escaped from an episode of *Grand Designs* and landed in one of the poorest areas in the UK. At the town's other exit is the recently closed streamline-moderne Hoover Factory, a dynamic design by Wallis Gilbert, architects of the more famous neo-Egyptian Hoover Building in Perivale. This one is a bit more restrained, a brick building with a dramatic curved corner, still heavily fenced-off, presumably to stop anyone from rummaging for scrap. Merthyr Tydfil also has a signposted 'Café Quarter', a square with a Chinese buffet and an iron bandstand, without a single person to be seen.

The next place we stop in is the village of Mountain Ash, in the Cynon Valley. Rows of precise, clipped council terraces lead towards one of the Valleys' several breath-stealing panoramic views, where the terraces, the hillsides and the variously derelict chapels and institutes come together in an accidental composition. The fulsome baroque town hall points out that it serves an 'urban district council', which answers the question as to whether the Valley villages are 'urban' or not, although Mountain Ash's population is just over 7000. That said, the place has bustling traffic at rush hour, as its inhabitants commute back from Cardiff and Newport. A lot of people here did, as IDS requested, get on their bikes, at least while they still could. A barn houses the local Citizens Advice Bureau. The landscape is magnificent, with forests of pine (apparently the result of post-war planning decisions) tightly enclosing what, for once, can aptly be called an urban village, a densely packed area that can be surveyed by the eye at once, that can be grasped as one entity. The hills make the place glorious as spectacle, and quite possibly, claustrophobic as a place to live.

Amazing Value

That certainly seems the case with Brynmawr, another series of terrace strips which once abutted the famous Brynmawr Rubber Factory, for a time Wales's most famous twentieth-century building. Its concrete vaults, designed by Architects Co-Partnership, were intended to house an industrial co-operative sponsored by

the Attlee government. Privatised in less than a decade and eventually converted into a Semtex factory, it was demolished in 2001 in defiance of Grade II listing. From here, Ebbw Vale. After a few hours in this traumatic townscape, you could easily imagine terrorist cells emerging, avenging the damage done to the town and its people. The anti-tank measures and frisking at Cardiff's Senedd suddenly make sense. Follow the sign to the DHSS, and you can find some of the saddest sights in Britain. Worn, never-changed signs to the Civic Centre lead to a decent, if undemonstrative 1960s complex, its office blocks surrounded by the churned-up paving of a car park. A distressed leisure centre has what looks like a growth on it, the bright yellow and green tentacles of swimming pool flumes, with broken glass underneath. An angular underpass takes you to the rest of the town, and it has the most eloquent graffiti. 'AMAZING VALUE £5 – A WORKING CLASS HERO'. Then there's a small recreational ground, and the start of the terraces. The street lights are on. It's three o'clock in the afternoon, in July.

There's a lot to admire in Ebbw Vale; the incongruously tall, scraping spire of Christ Church, dwarfing the terraces, evidently intended to be a landmark for miles around; the compact centre,



with the unexpected joy of a bright red Festival of Britain interior in the Crossing Café; another sadly derelict, austere-baroque Workers' Institute; even the concrete car park at its centre, a fittingly muscular design reminiscent of Gateshead's demolished Trinity Car Park. This one was saved, but *improved* by being painted white and covered in metal wire. The public art here, in dismal contrast to Merthyr, is pro forma, a swooping metal clock surrounded by steel balls. It was commissioned the year after the steelworks closed; the site is still being cleared for impending 'regeneration', which may or may not have a positive effect. These things always feel like a sop, but the rest of the country owes Ebbw Vale and neighbouring Tredegar a favour, to say the least. On a hilltop between the two towns, commanding views of only partly re-landscaped industrial waste, surrounding works, terraces and hills that would be crammed with sightseers were they elsewhere, stands a memorial to NHS founder Aneurin Bevan. It's the most striking man-made object in the area, although it goes back to the very foundations of architecture: a stone circle, in the place where he used to speak to his constituents. It feels moving, mystical, an ancient monument to the belief in a viable future. We were there on the NHS's sixty-third birthday.

Tredegar has one of the Valleys' nearest things to a town plan – the centre revolves around an iron column with a clock on top. We pause in front of one shop, where a familiar face is superimposed onto a torch. This is the offices of 'Spirit of Bevan', a film co-operative, where we stop for a chat; the area's politics are proudly described to us as '*Old Labour*', but this place is seemingly more New Labour in form – a building for the cultural industry. Of course, that's a caricature: what the group does is catalogue the area's history and struggles, and offer a means of cultural production to those who usually don't have it, without the cant of Aspiration and Empowerment that comes with the idea of cultural replacing industrial production. The Spirit of Bevan people point out to us that the local miners' self-run health service was the NHS's original inspiration – Bevan merely intended to 'Tredegarize' the rest of the country. There's a little monument also to a more modernist social architecture in the form of Powell Alport and Partners' Tredegar Library, a striking, dynamic little

piece of Brutalism, a riot of angles and geometries now accompanied by a mural depicting the town's radical heritage in naïf style, a manner seldom used for the depiction of socialism and class struggle. It bears repeating that the idea of the National Health Service was born here, in this tiny and peculiar place. Not in Manchester, not in Birmingham, not in London. And as in the surrounding towns, all that the rest of the country can summon up to present in return is out-of-town retail parks and call centres. Right now, the gift is being thrown away regardless, in a de facto privatization. The groundwork for this was laid by the 'market reforms', foundation hospitals and 'market discipline' imposed under the last Labour government. There's a horrible trap at work here. Could the Valleys, with their evident and admirable refusal to forgive or forget, offer a way out of it?

In Search of the Silicon Valleys

In some of its policies, devolved Wales offers an insight into what Labour Britain might have been like if John Smith hadn't died. The reforms of Neil Kinnock, making Labour into a not-even-particularly Social Democratic, mildly left-of-centre Party,



were retained, while the full-on Blairite putsch for caring, sharing Thatcherism was quickly faced off in Wales. Rhodri Morgan's Welsh Labour Party have tried over the last decade to put 'Clear Red Water' between themselves and Millbank. There are no PFI hospitals in Wales, there are no prescription charges, and perhaps most startlingly, the Labour and Plaid Cymru-dominated Welsh Assembly has recently started to bring in curbs on the 'right' to buy council housing. To put that move into perspective, it occurs just when the Tory–Whig coalition in Westminster has been introducing limits to tenure, Housing Benefit caps and 'Right to Buy plus'. Here, a Labour vote is perhaps not entirely a grudging or tribal reflex. However, the South Wales landscape also makes it clear that this hypothetical John Smith-led new era would have taken substantially similar steps to attract investment – the courting of multinational capital to employ low-wage and low-security labour, the use of public–private partnerships for infrastructure (if not health), and an exurban, car-centred form of urban development. No doubt, the business parks on the edge of most Valleys towns would never have come into being without Labour authorities' lobbying and subsidy.

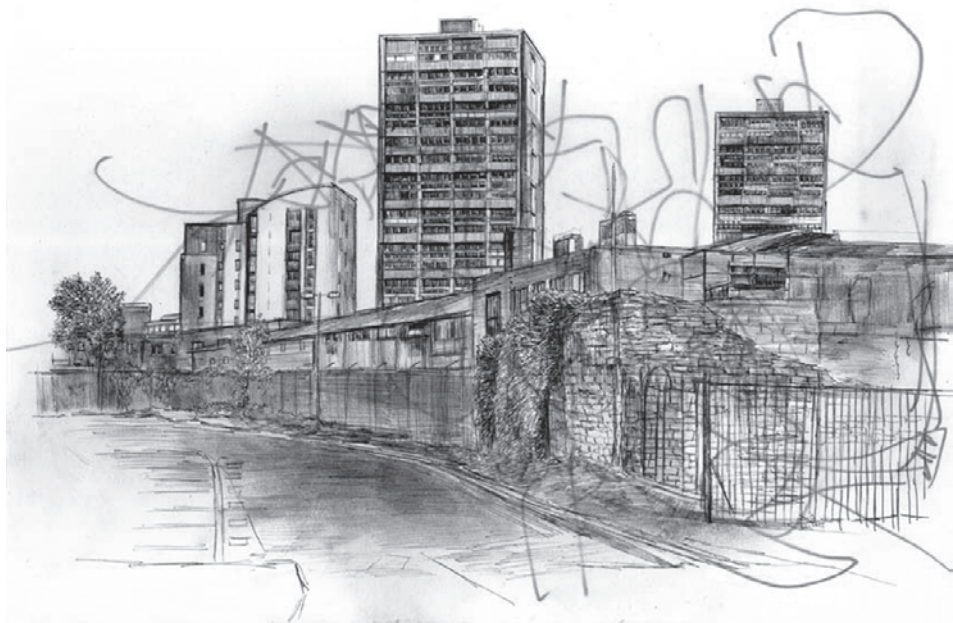
Blackwood is one town where the transition to the Silicon Valleys doesn't seem to have been entirely mythical, where a mining village has, arguably, become an exurb of Newport. It's one of the least peculiar-looking of these places; the immediate impression is of a West Midlands suburb that has been broken up and grafted onto series of lush hills; the houses that creep up them look a little larger and less harsh than in, say, Ebbw Vale or Mountain Ash, with gables and high pitched roofs. The high street, its shabby Victorian commerce interrupted by a big 1930s picture palace/Bingo Hall, has surely escaped from outer Birmingham. The Blackwood Miners Institute is not, at least, derelict. At the heart of the town is the most basic form of industrial replacement, a Big Shed retail development, housing a furniture store and a carvery. The finest piece of new architecture we see in the Valleys, by a long chalk, is here – Arup's Chartist Bridge, so named due to Blackwood's role in the Newport Rising of 1839. Opened in 2005, it's a sweeping cable-stayed bridge, simple and dramatic enough to shame all the Calatrava imitations. It's encouraging

that this monument's function is to bring these scattered towns closer together. The main function, though, is as a conduit in the Sihowy Enterprise Way, an exurban drosscape leading to the Oakdale Business Park nearby, the part-constructed replacement for the Oakdale Colliery, largely courtesy of the European Union's Objective 1 fund. Next to this is a colossal socialist-realist sculpture of a Chartist, by Sebastian Boyesen. Constructed from steel mesh, it looks ghostly, the spectre of a power that has disappeared, for the moment.

In quite close proximity is the most futuristic structure in the area, a monument from the days when it seemed as if cybernetic industry might adopt a vivid and memorable physical form, rather than an immaterial anti-form, of giant white sheds producing tiny functional objects. In that, it's an interesting road not travelled. The building in question is the INMOS Microprocessor Factory in Duffryn, just on the outskirts of Newport, designed by Richard Rogers in 1980. It has none of the self-conscious warmth and 'humanism' of his Senedd in Cardiff, but marks an earlier, more fearless Rogers, who at that point surely expected that he'd spend much of the rest of his career designing factories, rather than luxury apartment complexes and prestigious cultural buildings. Like the Lloyds Building, it takes industrial process and makes it into melodrama, foregrounding cables, ducts, pipes, the sinews and tendons of production, and assembling them into a memorable image, as opposed to just putting everything into a big box. And, unlike many a celebrated architect-designed industrial building, it still does what it was built for – the production of microprocessors, currently for the delightfully-named International Rectifier.

From here we head into Newport itself, the aforementioned friend's home town, to have a brief look round before heading back to England. Newport's cohesive, impressive face from the train is not entirely borne out on the ground, with some exceptionally heavy interventions by 1970s road engineers taking much of the pleasure out of the Usk riverscape; but it's hard to castigate a place for being car-centred when riding in a car. We're going to have a look at Newport Docks, especially at its Transporter Bridge. The way there takes us past several clearly just-finished

boom-era developments, surely likely to sit empty for some time. 'NEWHAUS – Contemporary Riverside Apartments'. Deutschlish is one way of avoiding the imperative to bilingual signs. The rain now becomes a Biblical torrent which makes the bridge look doubly ethereal, a far more spindly and delicate structure than that at Middlesbrough. This is the sort of tradition that Rogers must have thought he was working in at INMOS – the monumental display of industry and technology, proud and unashamed, the focus for the entire landscape. Opposite, in amongst the long, low sheds and battered brick factories, is a large Victorian hotel, with a bulbous, baroque clock tower. Someone must have wanted to stay here.



Chapter Fourteen

Edinburgh: Capital (It Fails Us Now)

The Scottish Difference

The question keeps coming back when thinking about the possible future of the United Kingdom. What if Scotland could be different? Fifteen years after devolution, a year after the Scottish National Party's landslide victory in the elections to the Scottish Parliament, and a year (if Cameron has his way) or two years (if Salmond has his) before a referendum on Independence, Scotland might be just about to flee the sinking ship. In this, the SNP have proven to be genuinely skilled politicians in a world of blagging PR wonks. Their left face is more convincing and concrete than Labour's, involving real policies such as getting rid of prescription charges and refusing to bring in tuition fees (except for English and Welsh students, of course), an effective opposition to PFI hospitals and health care 'reform', and a mild anti-imperialism that would also entail withdrawal of Trident. Their right face, meanwhile, is enough to gain even the support of Murdoch: a craven attitude towards finance capital, low-taxation policies, a (now-lapsed) enthusiasm for erstwhile neoliberal 'tigers' such as Ireland and Iceland, and a courting of hard-right privateers like Stagecoach boss Brian Souter. In that, they're not so much Tartan Tories as Tartan Lib Dems. Given that the Whig 'left' has evaporated in obsequious gratitude to a skewed coalition with the Tories, there is reason to be suspicious. The SNP is an opportunist Party, all things to all people, but one which has shifted Scottish politics way to the left of England's.

That might just presage the shape of the future Scottish Free State.

A trip to Edinburgh, then, should hopefully present something quite different, something more optimistic, than can be found south of the border. Scotland has a far more convincing tradition of urbanism than England. Its cities are northern European, not quasi-American. The four-storey tenements of Scottish cities are, when you strip all the history and the myth from them, simply the most imposing, convincing and cohesive form of mass architecture anywhere in the UK, both in their working- and middle-class versions; all the demands in the New Labour Urban Renaissance policy documents basically amounted to asking for the rest of Britain to be more like the West Ends of Edinburgh and Glasgow. The town plans of Glasgow, Aberdeen and of course Edinburgh are masterful creations, of a sort rare in England outside of tourist reservations like Bath (or Newcastle, which urbanistically speaking is a Scottish Exclave). This superiority is hardly limited to electoral politics or eighteenth- and nineteenth-century urbanism. For the last thirty years Scotland has had more skilled and original modernist novelists, less heritage-kitschy and exploitative film-makers, a less coked-up and obnoxious music scene, than England. It has a Conservative Party so tiny and marginalized that many of its high-ups are considering changing the Party's name in order to 'detoxify the brand'. It also has some of the poorest areas in Europe, some of the most luxuriantly corrupt, now-bailed-out banks, and a gap between rich and poor that rivals England's. There's not quite clear red water between the two, but definitely a pinkish sludge.

In contemporary architecture too, perhaps, Scotland might prove to have achieved something different. A tradition of living in flats and planning cities, a historic embrace of the sublime and powerful rather than the picturesque and pretty-pretty, are factors that ought to make a difference. Architects such as Malcolm Fraser, Elder & Cannon, Benson & Forsyth, Gareth Hoskins, the recently defunct gm&ad, or English expat Richard Murphy, all consider themselves proper urbanists and serious civic designers, rather than iconists or tinkerers. Housing Associations, until recently, still built a lot more up here than south of the border. So

can this country, which never bought into Thatcherism, offer a potential way out?

For those of us, like the present writer, who have never been to Edinburgh before, Waverley Station offers two very different introductions. First, you arrive in the most chaotically planned railway station, much of it under scaffolding, a multilevel maze; the first thing you see when leaving the King's Cross train is a cluster of police vans. Walk round this station a little bit and you find a grand, top-lit neoclassical entrance hall that was clearly once very elegant. At the centre of it is a little pod housing a branch of Costa Coffee. Anti-pigeon netting hovers above it like cobwebs, and no less than twelve CCTV cameras flank the edges, in case you were planning to loot a latte. Scottish Home Rule might well be making this overwhelmingly left-wing country a more humane place than its southern neighbour, but this station is a sight which could only be found in Great Britain. Heavy security, blaring commerce, mistreated imperial grandeur, confusing non-planning, all are present and correct.

Find your way out of the station, though, and you see something else, and the suffocating Festival crowds become irrelevant. A Victorian-futurist bridge soars high overhead, and its plunge bisects two tall towers, masonry on steel frames – baroque in theory, Gothic in practice. It's a scene as excitingly metropolitan as anything you'll find in Scotland's *de facto* rather than *de jure* capital in Glasgow, and it instantly replaces the initial feeling of irritation and dread with one of expectation and anticipation. Look to one side of this amazing *mise-en-scène* and you find a brutally craggy Acropolis; look to the other side and there's a planned neoclassical city of great urbanity. Familiarity with Edinburgh might well breed contempt, but my first reaction was speechless awe. And awe especially at how this unusual and dramatic form of urbanism can have become so popular, with the teeming crowds all around. Take Edinburgh and make it into a list of things people like in cities, and you'll find it highly counter-intuitive. What people like, apparently, is highly coherent and even authoritarian town planning, steep and melodramatic topography, very tall buildings, the total dominance of flats, with hardly any single-family houses to be seen – and sombre, dark

colour everywhere, with only tiny hints of the bright, the rustic or the twee. It doesn't even feel like a ceremonial capital, with the real action in Glasgow. In other places that it might be compared to – Bath, or Durham – were tourism to be taken away the whole thing might disappear, whereas in Edinburgh it feels as if the city could get along very nicely without all this unseemly bustle, thank you very much.

The Only Fun in Town

I received a quick lesson in Edinburgh topography by travelling west through the Georgian gridiron of the New Town, watching it gradually devolve into tenements that could be easily relocated to Glasgow, then past a large (and here, especially incongruously crap) 2000s school, eventually ending up at Fettes College, a Victorian Gothic design by David Bryce. It is absolutely enormous, Gothic taken literally, to the point of horror. It's housing a series of events on public art, so the entrance towers have in front of them giant cubic cats, with interactive exhibits inside. Slightly less prominent are 1960s low-rise additions, in expensively finished metal and stone. Fettes College is Tony Blair's alma mater. Like the travails of RBS, it's a reminder that the British ruling class is not at all exclusive to England. As a piece of architecture, resistance to it is futile. The College has a darkling presence on the skyline in this end of Edinburgh, its blackened, gory concoction of ever-more spindly and sharp towers protruding over an area of privilege as marked as anything in Mayfair.

Yet it is also an area of flats, and flats built as flats. The axis leading away from it is lined by inter-war tenements, showing the basic components of Scottish mass housing – the stone, the dignified austerity, the high windows, the scraggy backsides that you aren't supposed to look at – starting to accommodate a few cosmetic features from the modern movement, such as moderne typography, glazed stairwells and the elimination of previous tenements' already minimal ornament. At this point, one wonders what might have happened if this minor reform had been taken as a model for post-war urban mass housing in Scotland; if there had been a gradual repair and expansion of its working-class cities,

rather than a botched revolution. This is at least the thought that stays with you until visiting Leith, when you find far less attractive working-class inter-war tenements. Such a reformist approach could easily have been as grim as the towers and low-rises that eventually got built. That said, the pattern was actually being broken around here even then – after those neat '30s tenements, you encounter a Mansion Block that completely breaks with the compact streetline and openness, creating instead a large, insular complex, albeit one still detailed with the same square bay windows. Up the hill a bit, past someone's baronial fantasy of a stand-alone tenement, and you reach the Western edges of the New Town, in the form of the Moray Estate. Call me obvious, but it's glorious, unforgettable. First there's a bridge over a canyon, from which you can see the backs of the tenements rising out of the rock like a craggy *Metropolis*, or look out towards Leith's grain silos and the Firth of Forth; after that, you come to Randolph Cliff, and a half-crescent sweeps you into an environment of awesome urbanity; but its urge to create monumental order is constantly subverted by an unwilling topography that dips out of it, thrusts into it, leaving its unseemly posterior visible to the walker. The 'Athenian' aspiration is not at all mock-Mediterranean – the blackened sandstone is utterly northern. A junction pivots on American-styled inter-war offices and a red sandstone bank, both fugitives from Glasgow, and you're at Princes Street.

Princes Street is a one-sided, monumental avenue, punctuated by the sound of bagpipes and with all the Scottish Tat shops that you never find in Glasgow. Architecturally, it's not so much the built-up side that you notice, as the enfilade of towers running along the gardens and the railway embankment below; the freakish, untutored, charred Gothic of the Scott Monument, the Victorian baroque tower of the North British Hotel, leading eventually to the National Monument's instant ruin, and in the distance further follies dedicated to Nelson and Burns. All of them are in different styles, all of them are more than slightly absurd, and all of them seem strangely coherent, designed to be viewed together. Turn towards the Old Town and you find the temporary architecture of the Festival; corporate-branded pink inflatables, a geodesic dome, the techniques of 1960s utopianism



used, as intended, in the service of disposability and leisure, although not, as also intended, encompassing the entire city. Another form of 1960s architecture can be seen on Princes Street itself, in the results of the ‘Princes Street Panel’. This was a plan to restore the Georgian order to a street made eclectic and kitsch by the Victorians, although Georgian in spirit rather than letter – masonry façades on concrete and steel frames, with unused first-floor promenades across them. They’re all very professional and fairly elegant, though the failure to encompass the whole street rather defeats the object – but the idea is quite an interesting misunderstanding of what seems (to me, at least) the interesting thing about Edinburgh – the way that its attempts to create order are constantly assaulted by topography and fashion.

That’s not to say that every attempt to upend Georgian rationalism here is worthwhile. The complex of accretions known as ‘St James Shopping’ is a structure whose ability to have received planning permission even in the 1960s is truly extraordinary; unlike the Princes Street Panel’s conscientious attempt to produce a twentieth-century Edinburgh, this is a piece of pure, principle-free speculation with few redeeming features – and which, to make it worse, appears unstoppable, growing and morphing yet

never acquiring a personality. You first see the earliest part of the St James Centre in the form of a Thistle Hotel, straggling insultingly in front of the axial vista of Archibald Elliott's Waterloo Place. Its recent redevelopment compounds the injury, labouring under the twin misapprehensions that it can all be made better via wonky, 'friendly' shapes (iconic!) and stone-cladding (contextual!). In fact, the general fearless barbarity of the original 1960s shopping centre does provide one impressive view, where it appears as a concrete castle, rising to a central keep – but this aspect turns its face to alleyways and a bus station, rather than the boozy public thoroughfare of Leith Street. If you walk around those alleyways, the ruthless commercial interventions start to take on a more positive dystopian quality. Waterloo Place is carried over Calton Road by the neoclassical Regent Bridge, and from around here you can see gigantic, ancient-looking tenements traversed by bulbous, trussed Blairite walkways. There's a great twenty-first-century metropolitan redevelopment of Edinburgh in here somewhere, hidden by cowardice and thuggery.

First, a walk round the back-end of the Eastern New Town, or rather the Calton, a hilltop development where the topography seems to have been worked with rather than against. The dark, austere Royal Terrace and its continuations do manage to curve with the contours of the hill, and present an especially striking vision of affluence – houses so expensive that most of them are hotels or diplomatic premises, well protected against the hoi polloi. If you follow the sweep around here, you get to St Andrew's House, a 1930s government building designed by modernizing classicist Thomas Tait, responsible for many fine buildings in Glasgow, London and elsewhere, as well as the first modernist estate in the UK (that one's in Braintree). Due to its architectural authoritarianism and it being merely the branch for a Scottish Office based in London, this building is occasionally considered by Scottish Nationalists to be the headquarters of an occupying power. Be that as it may politically, architecturally the structure presents two very different faces. To the street, it is an ordered essay in art deco, with echoes (in the cubic lamp standards and gates) of constructivism and (in much else) the reduced classicism of the Italian Novecento. To the cliffs of the Old Town, it's

something far more exciting – a building which, like the earlier ‘Athenian’ Edinburgh, takes an international style and makes it look entirely indigenous, intrinsic to the landscape, its heavy stone volumes stepping down the crags. It makes no ‘references’, but feels organic to the landscape in a corporeal, non-rhetorical way. It’s a good place to disembark for the Old Town, in order to find the more recent expression of Scottish self-government.

The Radical Legacies of Conservative Surgery

The most picturesque, if also the most crowded approach to the Old Town is along the North Bridge, where its essential inauthenticity is at its most aesthetically invigorating. The two entrance towers are extraordinary, ten-storey Victorian high-rises. They’re not steel-framed, structure-expressing near-skyscrapers of the sort you find often in Glasgow, but the better-built extension of the mammoth tenements indigenous to the Old Town – structures which can present four storeys to the polite end of the street and ten to the back end, an extreme form of the ‘upstairs/downstairs’ division in English domestic architecture. One of them is the original offices of *The Scotsman*, the other a hotel – neither particularly medieval typologies. Walk from here through an arcade, and you’re in the ‘original’ Old Town, an elaborate, well-kept stage set full of secrets and subterfuge, well worth an extensive exploration if you can bear being importuned every five seconds by awful performers and flyers for stand-up comedians. The Festival’s temporary architecture is rather more direct here – a big sponsorship banner from Virgin Money, with the Huxleyesque legend ‘Because everybody joins in, everybody’s better off’.

Edinburgh Old Town, facing as it does the *tabula rasa* of the New, is the font of a planning tradition that is the opposing force to all *grands projets*. That’s not the tradition of the ad hoc medieval city itself, but the still-extant late-nineteenth-century rehabilitation of it, alternately for intellectuals and for its once-extensive working-class population. This is the legacy of Patrick Geddes, the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century planner who recommended ‘conservative surgery’ to repair slum districts

– which the tall, late medieval or Renaissance tenements of the Old Town certainly were when he started writing. The things about Edinburgh that are charming rather than merely impressive often stem from this. Ramsay Garden, the ‘Renaissance’ towers just by the castle, jutting out towards the ridge, visible from Princes Street, is one of Geddes’ interventions, and was initially let to students in order to get the middle classes back into the Old Town, to remake the famously foul ‘auld Reekie’ into something where medieval creepiness was evoked as an aesthetic and a memory, rather than a pungent reality. This was, in its way, very original indeed. Geddes evidently looked at architecture and planning that was indelibly associated with slums, a teeming and restless proletariat, squalor and disease, and saw in it a problem that could be entirely separated from its buildings, resolved without clearance or reconstruction, with the structures capable of being enjoyed for their architectonic qualities, with their associations very much secondary. It’s not a model that was fully accepted elsewhere until the 1970s, but here in the Old Town it has evidently had a century or so to do its work. In making the students of Edinburgh University central to this ‘rehabilitation’, Geddes could be regarded as an exceptionally early prophet of what we now know as ‘gentrification’. Yet, at least at first, the Old Town’s workers were as much a subject of this project as students. Round the other side of the Castle are very early (1900) council flats by the City Improvement Trust at Portsburgh Square, very much under Geddes’s influence – neo-Scots architecture with iron deck-access walkways. Around the freakish, fairytale Grassmarket there are more of these, much later – 1970s and 80s Housing Association versions, usually without the stonework, a little thin and contrived, but nonetheless providing cheap rents in an area that many rich Scots-Americans would give their fortunes to lodge within.

When you descend through Cowgate, it’s much easier to imagine the slum this once was – the bridges that were thrown across here to make it easier for those upstairs to get around still cast the area into gloom, and the effect still has traces of the H. G. Wells/*Metropolis*-like division of Victorian Edinburgh into Eloi and Morlocks. There’s a large Housing Association

scheme by Richard Murphy worth a glance, but more interesting is the plaque opposite, dedicated to the Marxist revolutionary James Connolly, who was born here, before gaining fame as an agitator in America and martyrdom in Ireland. Later, reading C. Desmond Greaves's biography of Connolly, I found the claim that Edinburgh was initially more of a socialist stronghold than the future Red Clydeside, but that slum clearance and rehousing in the Old Town had dispersed and tamed its insurgent proletariat. In that sense at least, conservative surgery really was Conservative, in the sense of being a safeguard against revolution. The circle has turned so sharply towards *laissez-faire* since then that it once again seems sharply radical. The very notion of providing working-class housing in a place like this! For a London equivalent to the abundant public housing on and around the Royal Mile, imagine council flats on Whitehall.

Canongate, the bottom end of the Royal Mile, shows this incongruity to its full extent. Here, tiny council estates, designed by Basil Spence in an unpretentious grey and brown Scottish Brutalist-Vernacular, or by Robert Hurd in an arcaded neoclassicism evocative of reconstructed post-war Central Europe, are as dignified and decorous as their repaired and renovated pre-modern forbears. The estate at the very foot of the hill is



Dumbiedykes, a standard, well-proportioned post-war council estate without any major nods towards its exalted setting, looking entirely unassuming in front of the outrageous topography of Arthur's Seat. That's something to celebrate, needless to say. If you follow the alleyways and stairwells off Spence's estate, you can find a Housing Association scheme, Morgan Court, designed in 1998 by Ungless & Latimer. The flats are relatively brightly coloured in red, white, blue, as had been some of the Geddes-inspired interventions a century ago, although the effect is a little closer to the palette of contemporary regen. There's another Housing Association estate nearby by Richard Murphy, of quasi-modernist 'tower house' tenements, which likewise falls somewhere in between orthodoxy and originality. Both are asymmetrical and ingeniously planned for their cramped sites, and in both, the tight organization and the surprising public spaces work very well together. This is, then, a living tradition, and sets the mind wandering. What if Bow or the Gorbals were treated like this in the 1960s? Repaired not by traditionalists, but alternately patched-up, sensitively infilled, and set in contrast with similarly scaled but aesthetically disjointed new developments, all managing to retain the atmosphere and feel of a teeming, friendly area while upgrading its amenities, sanitation, facilities and suchlike? Here, it seems to work, although the tourists must get on the nerves of the council tenants.

Holyrood Freaks

This seeming success makes it all the more disappointing that the most recent additions to the Old Town at Holyrood are so grindingly identikit, so quintessentially British, that they bring the place immediately crashing back down to earth. They include bank and newspaper offices, luxury flats, and a hotel, all of a very poor architectural quality, all on an incredibly prominent site. The largest are the blocks of the Park complex, planned by architects Campbell & Arnott (who went bust in 2010). Then there's the Macdonald Hotel, a vaguely postmodernist gabled block of similarly tacky materials. Both are roughly the right scale for the place, but in cheap and nasty materials – rendered concrete,

already stained and streaky, but with none of the tactile surfaces that can be found in the council housing nearby. There are classic 2000s bolted-on balconies, and there is slatted wood. Worse still are the offices, such as the curving, stone-faced wobbly-roofed buildings for *The Scotsman* and Citigroup by Comprehensive Design Architects, which don't even have the metropolitan proportions of the hotels and flats – just speculative office blocks that could be found absolutely anywhere in the UK, irrespective of the thin ashlar facing. The whole set-up closely resembles the shopping-mall vernacular additions to the St James Centre – and so it should, being by the same architects. Then there's The Tun, by Alan Murray, a verdigris block whose leaning form is inescapably in the 'iconic' mode. We're just opposite Arthur's Seat, and the Scottish Parliament. How did a site so important end up being botched like this? Small-scale gems like Malcolm Fraser's Poetry Library in Canongate itself, or Richard Murphy's very convincing Fruitmarket Gallery further into the centre, or other minor interventions to be found all over the city prove that Edinburgh has architects fit for the task. There's evidently a rule that Edinburgh gives its large projects to large firms and small projects to small firms. Unfortunately, the large firms tend to be nondescript corporate hacks. In the process, Edinburgh seems to be replicating the race to the bottom found in other British cities, though its wealth, importance and civic culture, suggest it should be in a better position than most to avoid it.

They do still work within Geddes's limits in the Old Town – the new Scottish spec architecture has a much larger enclave, which we'll get to later. But on brief acquaintance, there are two large-scale structures in Edinburgh after Geddes that abandon conservative surgery and instead go for the drastic and risky operation, one high-end, one low. The latter, the St James Centre, we've already discussed; the other is the Scottish Parliament, designed by the late Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue. This is a building that fully deserves to be taken seriously, however much bullshit and cant may have been expended on it as a topic. Unlike most monuments to Regeneration, which are generally one-liners that can be appraised at a glance, shape-making of little more complexity than the average corporate logo, this is a



building of fragments, passageways and alleys – an architectural montage with geological pretensions. Spreading into pieces at the foot of the hill, it defies glib analysis – it must be one of the only major projects of the last two decades to have managed to avoid acquiring a jolly nickname. It's flattered further by being placed next to a simple mini-Millennium Dome by Michael Hopkins, 'Dynamic Earth' – not awful in itself, but tellingly different; English technocratic architecture, unwilling or unable to make the site's appropriate statements about regionalism, independence and nationality.

The rationale behind choosing the experimental Catalan architects was a shared experience of devolution, with Edinburgh's claim to being the Barcelona of the North more geopolitically convincing than Manchester's. It's a neat gesture. If you're walking to the Parliament from the Royal Mile, your first sight of it is an angular volume, itself held up on a concrete crag, breaking off from the streetline. Set into it are various quotes in English, Scots and Scots Gaelic expressing valediction in escaping from 'Lunnon' along with various other pearls of wisdom, some annoying, some very funny, most appropriate. Then, opposite Holyrood Park, the entire ensemble stretches itself out in front

of a magnificently public park, framing the view of Arthur's Seat. The architecture is obsessively busy. A partial inspiration seems to be the Glaswegian Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the architect of world-changing genius that Edinburgh never managed to produce. Like Mackintosh's, Miralles and Tagliabue's architecture is the kind that provokes questions about *what the architect is trying to tell us here*; the façade positively begs for such speculation. Why those cow-like black shapes bolted elliptically onto the windows? Why the random wood outcrops bolted alongside? Why is the public entrance so low and cave-like? Some of these puzzles are obviously deliberate, but it's not a particularly interesting game to play. More intriguing is to chart on foot something much clearer from the mountain – the building's exploded form, assembled into several discrete parts, connected by raw concrete walkways. You can only get little glimpses of it as a pedestrian wandering around, or as pedestrian not on a guided tour, but it's here at the back, where the occasionally too whimsical play of forms and oblique signs meets a heavy, physical tectonic mass, that the building really thrills.

Aside from the park that flows out towards Arthur's Seat, the most striking strictly *urban* aspect of the Scottish Parliament is how Miralles and Tagliabue, or their executive architects RMJM, specifically tried to design the ubiquitous security features of a contemporary government building. Rather than leaving it to the council, the architects helpfully provided bristly organic high fences and sensually curved concrete blast walls. This takes on an extra resonance when you find that some of the estates in Canongate have been slated for demolition; evidently the Scottish Parliament isn't entirely comfortable with even a tamed, well-housed working-class population so close by. No Scottish cities rioted in the month when we were wandering round Edinburgh, unlike practically every large English city except Sheffield, a cause for some self-congratulation north of the border; but that doesn't mean they're not hedging their bets.

Bad Banks and their Bad Buildings

On the second of the two summertime visits to Edinburgh, we were staying in a tenement in Morningside, an affluent suburb to the south of the city centre. A route from there into town was a vivid journey through this mini-Metropolis, and one that also entailed initial excitement and final disappointment. Morningside itself is a marvellous place, a sleepy series of monumental tenement-lined streets containing a cornucopia of charity shops, a testament to the civic virtues of the Edinburgh bourgeois. The pleasure here, architecturally, is mostly in watching the tenements stride out towards another close, elemental, mountainous landscape in the south (with Arthur's Seat visible just to the east), but there's some interest to be found in the smaller buildings. There's the moderne Dominion cinema, some aggressive, demonstrative churches, and a pub, The Merlin, that presents a faceted glass front to the street, designed by Chris Stewart in 2002. That a new pub would be of such quality is a sure sign of affluence, and of the very active civic society and architectural watchdog groups that tend to come with it. The closer you get to the centre, the larger and more grandiose the tenements become, the more their architects (or, more realistically, their builders) seem to be playing with the looming, intimidating qualities of the form; stretching the bay windows upwards with the high ceilings, adding bloody great conical turrets onto them, as if in megacity competition with the industrial metropolis on the west coast.

When this meets the Old Town, various modern interventions move into this darkling ashlar streetscape. The earliest is the 1930s St Cuthbert's Co-Operative Building in Bread Street, a rare architectural example of Edinburgh pioneering rather than critically assimilating. Set into a row of Victorian stone tenements, it's a sheer glass curtain wall, recently adapted reasonably faithfully (architecturally rather than ethically) into a Conference Centre. Its advanced glass structure was unusual for the UK at the time (if not for Germany, Holland or Czechoslovakia), but the curio value lies in representing a very early essay in the notion that a neutral glass addition to a historic building structure is the way to show effective respect, without the pieties of staying 'in keeping'.

That has since become the orthodox way of building extensions to art galleries and such, to the regular spleen of *Private Eye*'s architectural correspondent 'Piloti'. This is a very fine early example of the form, sitting in the middle of the street as if bridging it. Or maybe it just seems elegant in comparison with the architectures that would follow it.

It's at this point, in Tollcross, that the architecture of Scottish finance capitalism can be fully appreciated, if that's the right word – a centre of various banks and insurers more dense than any to be found outside of London. If there's a comparison to be made, it's less to the new architecture of the English capital and more to Leeds. The Yorkshire city's masonry-mixed-with-high-tech style is the nearest equivalent in architectural manner, but not quite in scale – while Leeds banks wilfully go up to twenty storeys plus, you can't quite get away with that in Edinburgh, as the recent furore over a proposed Richard Murphy tower by Haymarket Station made very clear. The reduced height, of course, always means a translation into greater bulk, into spreading, corpulent width. There's a common language here, to the point where it looks like there were strict design guidelines. To the street, a line of ashlar cladding, studded with irregular fenestration; to the corners and intersections, large expanses of glass, preferably either curved or pointed for maximum 'iconic' effect, just in case anyone thought the aesthetic was a little staid. The men in dark suits stride purposefully from one to the other.

As to what we're looking at here – there's the Princes Exchange, designed in 2001 by PJMP architects, probably the most obnoxious of these structures. It takes up an entire block, on a roughly triangular plan. The style derives at several removes from Richard Rogers and Norman Foster, with glass stair towers, shiny metallic cladding and mock-industrial gob-ons, which has now gone worn and seedy. The front façade, with its glazed outlook tower, houses Lloyds, the back gets the Bank of Scotland, as if to presage some future bankruptcy-induced merger. A little better is the slightly earlier Scottish Widows HQ by BDP, which is a straight crib from Michael Hopkins's designs for the Inland Revenue in Nottingham – a not-too-modernized image of bureaucracy, where the integration between stone and glass has been achieved

with relative skill, ashlar columns placed between fairly elegant oriel windows. A similar style is followed by Terry Farrell, the MI6 architect who was until recently official ‘design adviser’ to the Scottish capital, in the Edinburgh International Conference Centre. This large stone rotunda is fearsomely unlovely and overbearing, made even more vast by a recent BDP extension. As the expression of basically corrupt institutions with ancient roots who have recently become notorious for making reckless use of new computational methods with disastrous results, it’s architecturally as clear and apt as could be. As a piece of townscape, it’s painful in its clumsy alternation between aggression and blandness. The delicate surgical interventions, fantasies and Brutalist fancies in the Old Town seem a long way away.

The Surgeon Falters

Given that the riots in England and Wales occurred the month I visited Scotland, I was regularly reminded by proud Scots of the absence of civil unrest in the northerly part of the island. One of the many possible explanations for this centres on the different structure of Scottish cities. Although Glasgow and Edinburgh do have ‘mixed’ districts – the Old Town proves to be a surprising example – their ‘European’ nature extends to localizing extreme poverty in distant settlements, cut off from public transport, employment and civic life – Easterhouse or Drumchapel in Glasgow, Muirhouse or Niddrie in Edinburgh. Given its Irvine Welsh-mediated reputation, I had assumed Leith to be one of these peripheral, class-segregated places, a Forthside *banlieue*. The way that people I spoke to in Edinburgh talked as if Leith was not part of the city (‘Oh, we didn’t really have an industrial working class here. Except for Leith’) seemed to support the idea. I was to be very surprised. Leith is a place as much marked by the very poor living next to the very comfortable as can be found in the East End of London. It’s a town with a great and sombre power all of its own, and a place which displays a contrast between Geddes-issue repair and rehabilitation, and *tabula rasa* sweep, as stark as in Edinburgh itself.

Depending on the bus you take into Leith, you can pass

along impressive and harsh sandstone tenements in a straight line to the sea, or you can take a perhaps more instructive route round the houses. That bus route takes you past the Hibernian stadium, and the large and completely nondescript, car-centred Meadowbank retail park, housing Bingo, M&S, TK Maxx and KFC. The latter is most strange to find so very close to central Edinburgh, as opposed to in a much smaller, poorer town, or more usually, on such a town's outskirts. Doesn't this place have any self-respect? A clue as to why this was permitted is offered when the bus takes you through some typical Leith housing. The bland interwar tenements are the concomitant to the elegant 1930s efforts glimpsed earlier near Fettes College. The tenement tradition continued, by all means, with the same relation to the street, the same scale, the same density, the same closeness to amenities and work, all the things that led to their reappraisal in the wake of Scotland's modernist period – but in execution they were immeasurably poorer, pebble-dashed and marked on the façade by big utilitarian drainpipes. Oddly, class difference is actually less palpable in the contrast between Victorian tenements in Leith and in Morningside, although that wouldn't have been true of the interior organization, to put it delicately. The other, more optimistic straight route to the sea, shows what at first looks like a completely coherent working-class extension of Edinburgh. Then you start noticing the sheer amount of new buildings, on what would once have been gap sites and wastelands, and realize that a major work of conservative surgery has taken place here. Leith has been patched up and resuscitated, with infill blocks for private landlords, Housing Associations or both, restoring what must have been long-disrupted streetlines.

So you can follow that main approach to the sea and turn into the grand, imposing entry point to the docks, and find something pretty much as impressive as anything else here. The classical showpieces – the Custom House, the Exchange – are superb, austere and so soot-blackened that they assume a very different face to the sandblasted Edinburgh streetscape. The commercial and residential buildings too are darker, rougher, somewhere between port and fishing village. The dominant colour is black. Given how smooth this approach to Leith is, could it have been

that pre-crash Leith was an Urban Renaissance success story? However sensible Geddes-style incremental planning might be for these sorts of dense, highly developed areas, they rest on a certain degree of architectural skill that, for some unfathomable reason, has been absent in recent additions, so there can be a fair bit of quibbling about the quality of the surgery. The patient may have been saved, but the stitching can look quite untutored. The prettiest part of central Leith, the Shore, is a great example of this, as the infill, while perfectly scaled to the surroundings, is too often on the wrong side of twee, or worse, cheap. What makes Leith especially interesting is that here, you can watch the urban planning interventions under the contrasting influences of Patrick Geddes and Le Corbusier fighting it out in exceptionally close proximity.

Leith was subject to dramatic slum clearances, and the largest-scale result of this, the architectural event of Leith in many ways, is Cables Wynd House, designed in the mid-1960s by Alison Hutchinson and Partners – an immense concrete Unité d’Habitation that sweeps sinuously past dense alleys and side-streets. It’s a fine, even heroic work of architecture on a magnificent scale, but perhaps less impressive as urbanism, with the car parking block of these ‘Banana Flats’ a barrier between itself and the rest of the city. What is plainer, however, is that this place actually manages to solve the question of keeping the non-affluent in the centre better than the small-scale Geddesian interventions. Housing Association developments tend to provide for a mix of public tenancies subsidized by private renting/buying – so, in short, the amount of people they can take off the council waiting list is fairly minimal. The Banana Block is sweeping in its politics as much as in its form, scooping the area up and rehousing it in something grandiose and highly public, a monumental form which necessarily dominates everything around it – a focus, a place which shows itself off. If there is a fight here between the two approaches, the strength of this block means we’d have to call it a draw.

At the heart of the new Leith is a less informal piece of town planning: the Scottish Office, now the Scottish Government, designed in the mid-90s by RMJM. The gating here isn’t playing

the coy games that EMBT used at Holyrood, but is a perimeter fence that you wouldn't want to fuck with, a paranoid panorama of business-park misery. It's central to the transformation of the derelict port via the pepper-potting of office blocks, luxury flats and bistros, all of which sit next to stark poverty – in Leith, as in London, you really can walk in seconds from the glass-strewn forecourts of semi-derelict estates to Michelin-starred restaurants. It's lively, and the pubs are excellent, but it's all a bit unnerving. One stretch of high-end restaurants is just opposite the security gates for the Government offices, a straight line. They're part of a warehouse conversion.

Speculation, Reindustrialization, Dereliction

What makes the above somewhat unfair is that there is a place in Leith where large-scale, *tabula rasa* development has been attempted, and it is not good. Leith Dock is an unbelievable mess, an enormous and hellish swathe of vacuous, lowest-common-denominator development that would shame a southern English town, let alone the Scottish capital. It is a complete disaster, whose lineaments are so vast as to be hard to describe, whether



in architectural or political terms. It's no use blaming it on the direct context. Leith itself, especially after its recent patching-up, can nearly hold its own with the city centre in its muscular, robust neoclassicism; even the immediate industrial context can be architecturally dramatic and worthwhile – the entirety of Leith Docks is overlooked by a massive, Americanist Concrete Atlantis of a grain silo, far more of an icon than anything built facing it. And the most obvious point: this is a short bus ride from an extremely rich city centre, a capital both administrative, at the Parliament (which, as noted, even has a branch here), and financial, with all the monstrous offices on Tollcross. That city has been responsible for two of the most impressive acts of town planning in European history, the neophile sweep of James Craig's original New Town and the more recent, carefully-tended montage of the Old Town. It has, again as you can verify in the Old Town, several very skilled and imaginative contemporary architects. The place also has an original and deeply local planning and architectural tradition, a degree of political independence, and a wise distrust of public-private partnerships. Literally everything was on their side here, so how did they manage to create something so awful?

It's best, for contrast, to head off towards the Leith Docks redevelopment from the Exchange and Custom House. The tenements and infill stop abruptly at one point, where you can see the Mint Casino as your entrance to the new. It's clad in pinkish stone, with a green glass entrance portal, the rest of the façade marked only by tiny square windows. There are better buildings in retail parks in Charlton. The riverside walk, Ocean Way, is scrubby and fenced-off, with weeds growing where the public promenade should be. There are several different versions of the basic flat form, but they're all similarly shoddy. Eight storeys is the norm, usually with some staggering of skylines so that we don't spot how monolithic it all is, all dressed up in the most basic and clumsy way, with Trespa hoods over the windows, dozens of gobbled-on metal balconies, fences and random protrusions, and the ubiquitous wonky roof is resorted to on every possible occasion. I'm not exaggerating here – this is actively on the level of the worst student housing in Leicester, the most egregious new yuppiesdromes in Birmingham, the naffest exurban abortions in

Dartford. It puts certain things in perspective, too – other meretricious yuppie colonies from the Olympic Village to Glasgow Harbour suddenly look by comparison like, well, Edinburgh New Town. The centrepiece of the whole thing is an enclosed shopping mall, known as Ocean Terminal, a (Conran-designed!) mall exactly like any other mall; next to it in the wasteland is Ocean Point, a nondescript office block that, for once, is not even pretending to be friendly. That's by Sir Terry Farrell, but much of this ensemble is by a firm called Gilbert Associates, about whom I could discover nothing more than that they have their offices on Grassmarket. One of the blocks on Ocean Drive has an all-but illegible inscription, which when you look up close reveals itself to be the imprint of an erased RBS logo.

So who is to blame? The site is owned and run by Forth Ports, the privatized successors of the nationalized dock company, who are doubtless lacking in expertise for the development of new urban districts. The original plans by RMJM were harshly and rightly criticized, and then replaced with new guidelines by Winchester neoclassicist Robert Adam. In this chaos, neoclassicism's staid certainties should be relatively welcome, but the succession of plans doesn't change the fact that the actual execution is always in the hands of whichever developers each slice of previously public land is served up to. But in itself, even this should not be a problem – much of the later New Town was built on plans commissioned by private speculators. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a relic of feudalism that enforced quality: the Dean of Guild, who had jurisdiction over the construction of new parts of the city. Ellen Meiksins Wood has argued that the unpleasant appearance and shaky civic culture of English cities was a result of the particularly capitalist development of England, its lack of these feudal or guild remnants, along with the more recent lack of the Continent's comparatively strong social democracy. Scotland, conversely, might look 'European' because of its stronger feudal legacies and its stronger working-class movement. Judging by Leith Docks – sorry, 'Edinburgh Harbour' – Scotland has now fully caught up with England.

That's before we even start to consider the Tram that was supposed to link the new developments to the city centre, which has

been a massively expensive farce, another exemplar of the UK's strange inability to perform even the most basic tasks, to build even the most basic infrastructure. There is really no excuse for this place other than philistinism, stupidity, desperation and graft. The site is now pockmarked with wasteland, and Edinburgh Council ought to be publicly shamed into clawing back some shred of pride by starting over with something that is at least slightly worthy of its location. As it is, there are indications that something might happen here. First, the total commercial failure of much of Leith Docks' redevelopment, left half-constructed, has meant that many of the flats have been let to council tenants, at council rates. That's not an unalloyed good, given that the dwellings are of far lower build quality and space standards than the average council flat. The other interesting thing is that, evidently shaken by their experience in town planning, Forth Ports have talked of reindustrializing the site instead, building wind turbines and a great big biomass power station. It might blow the smell of effluent across Leith, but they could no doubt argue that it was ever thus. In these two fairly grim developments, there are hints of the things that could happen as positive, conscious developments on this site – the return of decent public housing, the reindustrializing and reinvestment in derelict industrial sites. That they're being considered here as a last resort is not necessarily here or there.

The curious subtext of all this is that Edinburgh once managed to assimilate practically every kind of foreign architectural tradition into its streetscape, and made it look convincingly of its place, made it look Scottish. Athenian classicism, French town planning, various forms of Gothic, even 1930s art deco and post-war Brutalism, all can feel utterly local when built here, if done with the right amount of thoughtfulness and conviction. Interestingly, however, Edinburgh's architects couldn't take the pallid pseudomodernism of the New Labour era and assimilate that to the genius loci. At Leith Docks, they merely achieved a highly believable simulation of the Thames Gateway on the Firth of Forth.



Chapter Fifteen

Aberdeen: Where the Money Went

After the Oil Rush

It often escapes attention, especially south of the border, but the UK is an oil state. Although, unlike that riot-torn compendium of inequality, violence and social collapse Norway, the British government had the good sense to leave North Sea Oil in private hands, much money has been generated by the oil deposits off the north-east coast of Scotland, and it should have left some interesting effect on Aberdeen. This former fishing and shipbuilding town has, for over thirty years, been the centre for the administration, exploitation and development of the fossil fuels discovered off the coast of Scotland. So Aberdeen should, in theory, be a pulsating hub of the enterprise economy, it should glitter with gorgeous architecture, vaulting forms and general pugnacity. Full of petrodollars and a large population of 'wealth creators', it ought to be a thumping vindication of British free-market capitalism.

Strained sarcasm aside, it isn't quite that. Aberdeen, when it was a pejoratively thin-lipped Presbyterian town that made its money from fish and boats, had the kind of proper architectural and urbanist ambition so common to Scotland and so foreign to England. Strict building laws, a focused and clear town plan, decent upstanding architecture, all worked together to create a unified, coherent urban identity, facilitated by ready supplies of granite. It is striking, almost dreamlike, to find an entire city made of this stuff; under the slate-grey skies, it is an environment so regionally specific that you could easily get lachrymose. Almost

everything in sight is grey. You can just imagine the colourful! architectural contingent, the likes of Will Alsop, Christophe Egret or AHMM, having coronaries in the face of it. ‘But where’s the *vibrancy*?’ In fact, Aberdeen is bustling most of the day, with the colour scheme obviously not having an immediately depressing effect, and in that perhaps traces of the oil money can be seen. It is personable, and by Scottish standards, cosmopolitan. Lost on our arrival at around midnight, dazed after hours upon hours on a train, we were given directions by a group of young men and women out on the town, half West African, half East European. They told us a little about the town, and recommended a wander around Torry, on the other side of the river Dee.

The hypothetical ‘European visitor’ invoked occasionally on these pages is (here in particular) an *actual* European, my partner Agata. On this, her first trip to Scotland, it was obvious that she felt far more at home than she ever had in the English cities we had walked around. This was the third Scottish city she had seen in a week, and she was already asking why we didn’t move here; she couldn’t see how anyone in their right mind could ever get excited about Manchester or Brighton when there was Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. The gradual realization that the weather was likely to stay like this was, eventually, enough to dampen her ardour, but she’d recognized the fact that city planning was really taken seriously here, and the civic life that it implies is, to a great extent, visible and real, in the present. The problem, and it’s a big problem, is that this uniqueness has a particular temporal limit. In Aberdeen, it ends in the mid-1970s, roughly the time that redevelopment ends in, say, Glasgow. Yet while Glasgow’s industrial economy fatally contracted in that decade, Aberdeen’s surged forth from nowhere, a new petrochemical giant emerging from its granite carapace. The architectural result is identical in both cities.

The central paradox of Aberdeen, which also applies to the UK as a whole, is as follows. When it was a relatively poor town, Aberdeen spent enormous amounts of time and money on architecture and planning; the early-nineteenth-century development of Union Street nearly bankrupted the municipality and its backers. Civic architecture from the 1930s to 1970s shows a

correct, if sometimes rather dour municipal standard being kept up. Yet in the thirty-five years since Aberdeen became the Oil Capital of Europe, the city has not seen a single worthwhile building in the city centre. *Not one.* Over a quarter-century of parsimony and mediocrity has been wealth's bequest to the city. In fact, as you soon find if you cross the Dee into the tenements of Torry, *not even wealth has been wealth's bequest to the city.* Maybe for the first few years, until the gold rush calmed down, there just wasn't time – but the most recent proposals and buildings are perhaps the worst of all. That this isn't even *surprising* is indictment enough. How on earth did we settle for this? How did Aberdeen settle for it?

The poverty of architecture in the UK is often, and justifiably, ascribed to industrial decline. The story is the same whether the site is in Wapping, Govan or Digbeth, when it comes to shell-shocked municipalities agreeing to anything that might reinvigorate their moribund economies and generate jobs and investment: fancy architecture can wait, but for god's sake don't put off Persimmon, Tesco or Travelodge. What makes Aberdeen an almost shocking experience is that here there's no decline. There's a port, and it's working all day, with ships and dockers in constant movement. The harbour area reflects that, from the new hotels to the signs in Norwegian in the waterside theme pubs, to the monumentally obnoxious traffic, with endless lines of lorries and the longest pedestrian waiting times imaginable. Unlike the superficially comparable nuclear port of Barrow, it doesn't feel like a strange, securitized graft onto a dying town, but very much a part of it, organically connected to the life of the city. Yet just next to that harbour is a new Ibis Hotel that is every bit as dismal as every other Ibis Hotel in the UK – more so perhaps, because of the way it clumsily spreads itself out across a sloping cobbled street, which terminates in a miserable Vue cinema. Aberdeen's planning department surely knows that Ibis needs them more than vice versa. It can't have come from lack of confidence. Yet the exact same racket is at work here as everywhere else. There is one consolation, perhaps – the Ibis is at least grey. The planning department must have insisted.



Red Vienna, Grey Aberdeen

What the posters here call Aberdeen's 'civic heart' is a thumpingly exciting place, running off that vivid contrast between the austere rectitude and sparkling surface of the architecture, the sobriety of the planning and the vitality of its street life. Yet like any other city centre it is soon to undergo changes, as the 'REGENERATING ABERDEEN' posters placed on a derelict building make clear. Each of them shows a thin line drawing of a newly rejuvenated square. They beg a question. Regenerating Aberdeen from what, exactly? From what recent period of decline in this highly economically successful city? A few clues to how limited this success might be become apparent, when you find several derelict buildings in the centre. Even then, something strange happens to dereliction in Aberdeen. The pristine granite doesn't really age, but of course things grow on disused buildings here as much as they do everywhere else, so there is the interesting spectacle of shrubbery growing out of otherwise sparkling grey stone buildings. The Macintosh department store on Union Street is a case in point, an Edwardian baroque structure with pretty mosaic signage and unsubtle mid-twentieth-century additions, such as a concrete Gothic extension and some very nice external walkways.

Union Street's general standard of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings is impressive, partly for their elegance, partly just for thoroughness and consistency. You quickly find that the tradition of slightly staid but dignified architecture was intelligently continued in the early twentieth century, as in the ghostly neo-Gothic of Alexander Marshall Mackenzie's Marischal College, or his amusingly stolid, neoclassical St Mark's Church. The American classical RBS building on Union Street showed metropolitan flair, using the expanses of glass made possible by steel frames, then sticking precise, machine-detailed Ionic columns onto them in order not to scare the horses. The 1960s municipal buildings, such as the towering office block housing the town hall, are similarly flattered by their material. The only pre-petrol disappointment is Aberdeen Market, its ungentrified interior space clearly very important to the city's sense of liveliness, but architecturally sadly introverted, based on a series of large, windowless grey drums inserted into the cityscape.

This is all very pleasant, but where it gets really interesting is where topography meets engineer. The sweeping Rosemount Viaduct is a classic 'improvement', rising up a steep slope which the architects exploit to its greatest extent, providing corner towers, oriel windows and a jagged skyline. There are (superb)



charity shops on the ground floors, and tenements above – which, while a good piece of urban planning, must also provide strange and cramped rooms, as the building twists and narrows its way up the hill. Follow this row of tenements and eventually you find yourself at a later adaptation of the tenement system, A. B. Gardner’s Rosemount Gardens.

This 1930s council scheme (1930s-designed, that is – it was finished just after the Second World War, as is recorded by a plaque and a Saltire Society bauble) is not based on the tenement structure of Scottish cities at all, which means no shops on the ground floor and no streetline; but it also means no unkempt afterthoughts at the back ends, no outside toilets, no division between ornate front to the bourgeois passer-by and an unseemly mess where they aren’t looking. Its inspiration is amusingly obvious – it’s a delightful mini-Karl-Marx-Hof in granite, copying practically to the letter, albeit on a smaller scale, the precedent of Red Vienna. The Austro-Marxist municipality in the ’30s didn’t totally reject the tall flats and courtyard structure inherited from the nineteenth century, as did Modernists in Rotterdam, Berlin and Moscow, but instead adapted them, creating a series of ‘Hof’ buildings, where strong, proud façades were entered through grand archways, leading to public parks and gardens, around which the flats and their entrances were arranged. The sense of warmth and enclosure the Red Vienna style created is clearly appropriate to the ruthlessly dreich climate of Aberdeen. On each of the archways, there’s Eric Gill-like sculptures, with fairly simple optimistic symbolism (bare-breasted woman on flying horse, for instance). When you enter, the feeling is of having stumbled into a pocket park, with trees and swings overlooked by the flats’ balconies. The form was never directly emulated, but it marks what is surely the most cheering thing about Aberdeen.

High-Rises versus Tenements

Very interestingly, and unusually for a non-new town in Scotland, post-war modernism was of much the same quality as these pre-war flats, although on a far greater scale. In fact, Aberdeen’s towers flaunt their size fearlessly, in a mode not entirely dissimilar

to the hulking slab blocks of Glasgow. The especially dramatic hilltop Gallowgate estate is a case in point, with maisonettes and then towers stepping upwards from a vigorously modelled car park. There's nothing original in the design, but everything is used with purpose and strength. There are tapered, cubistic pilotis holding up these massive blocks, and two glass walkways strung between them; the concrete frame is clad in rubble panels, with granite set into it. This use of local materials is stirringly effective in Virginia and Marischal Court, on a site just off Rosemount Viaduct – very Glaswegian in their sheer bulk, but far from Glaswegian in their careful use of materials.

Most, if not all of this, can be found in other towers, in other towns, but Aberdeen has stumbled, perhaps via an enlightened use of its surely sizeable tax revenues, on the blindingly bloody obvious. It hasn't treated its high-rise estates as a problem to be solved, via a similarly sweeping measure to that which created them in the first place. Aberdeen City Council has instead treated them as decent housing, to be maintained and looked after. It helped that they had something of a high quality to start with. The building of these towers in the mid-60s was put under the direct control of municipal architect George McKeith, rather than Wates or Wimpey.¹³ Because of this there was no system-building, no cheap instant solutions, but in-situ concrete, sharp Corbusian designs, and granite infill that glows beautifully in the (admittedly rare) sun. And as it seemed to work well, they didn't stop – the city council was still building tower blocks to this standard as late as 1985, when the sober, minimal, rationalistic (and squeaky-clean) St Clements Court was built. It's now used as sheltered accommodation, close to the centre and its amenities, with an exhilarating view – the opposite of the tendency to relegate sheltered accommodation to darkened corners.

The puzzle remains. Of course there's more money in this city than most, but the same could be said about London, or Edinburgh, where the record is quite different. It doesn't seem to exactly fit with Aberdeen's other priorities, such as its enthusiastic embrace of the exurban office block and the shopping mall. But somehow, the money went somewhere decent, for once, in the renovation and upkeep of its housing estates – the one time I've

ever really seen the boom's capital evidently invested in the maintenance and respect, rather than the clearance and demonization, of a working class area. This might be that 'Scottish Difference' again, although a quick trip to the estates of Glasgow would divest anyone of that notion. But conversely, walk around the Victorian tenements of Torry, and things are less impressive. The housing is on a far smaller scale, reflective of the fishing town that this once was; none of the enormous sandstone enfilades you can find in Edinburgh, Clydeside or Dundee, but small terraced flats with little top rooms set into the roof. People are poor here, and they're often poor in the tower blocks as well. There's a sharper air in Torry, though, hints of desperate drinking. There are boutiques in amongst the newsagents and the pubs, but you could still be in a depressed, granite Gorbals while the ships chug in and out of the dock just adjacent, their wealth never seeming to reach just a few dozen yards away.

Union Square, Forever

If you walk back from Torry to the centre, you go through some of the places where the oil money went, most of which are mercifully confined to the suburbs. There's the oil drums and petrochemical storage, a series of branded tubes and cylinders next to the narrow river; a drab '70s office block with a new, even cheaper new glass bit added, which is the offices for Sodexho, ODS Petrodata, Atkins – a strange mix of engineers and our usual outsourcing vultures; and further on, the wipe-clean business-park nonentity of the Bridge View office block. It's not encouraging. Then you reach Union Square, the city's new megamall. In the centre of town, just opposite Marischal College, there's a city council poster of Union Square's surface car park, its grim exurban-imposed-on-inner-urban expanse in front of Marks & Spencer, as if they were proud of it. There are two possible entrances – this particular vision of purgatory, and another, more urban entrance, by Aberdeen Railway Station. Next to this is a clumsily massed Jury's Inn, but the mall itself commits its own acts of civic thuggery – namely incorporating and swallowing up part of the railway station, to leave this with a reduced,

unimpressive rear frontage to the street. So much less important, after all. Walk into the thing, and we're in 2002 forever – a wood-lined roof, and great big canary-yellow Millennium Dome columns, marking an axial entrance to Yo! Sushi; globalization's gift to the city of Aberdeen. It is, however, optimistically named – returning to the Regency gesture of naming developments after the Union between England and Scotland.

The real disaster hasn't happened yet. Union Terrace Gardens is a fabulous public space carved out of infrastructural accident, a bowl curving down from a viaduct along a railway track, a magical little place of mature trees, strange steps and courting Goths. It's completely unique in its topography, a park with real terrain, not a mere civic concession. The story of what is happening here is complicated, so I hope not to get it wrong. To my knowledge, there was first a proposal by a local arts group to build a centre into the dip of the park itself, leaving the salient things about it unchanged. This was rejected in favour of a 'city square' project, which would entail building on top of the gardens, creating a flat landscape which had the interesting consequence of lots of space underneath, where a car park and a shopping mall could be placed. This proposal was then blessed with a multi-million contribution by local oil millionaire Sir Ian Wood; but, in order to unite the two ideas somewhat, there was an international architectural competition for this mall-imposed-upon-park. That didn't impress locals, who protested with a 1,000-strong 'picnic-in'. As a space, Union Terrace Gardens is deliberately secluded. It's a model of civic life based on shelter, quiet, and relaxation, none of which tend to involve much shopping (there are three malls in central Aberdeen). It isn't exactly crowded, but the public esteem for something as undemonstrative as this is heartening.

The underground mall that would level the park has been described by its backers as a putative 'cross between an Italian Piazza and a mini-Central Park'. That line sums up what the problem is here: the topographical specificity of the place, the things that make it impossible anywhere else, are to be obliterated. It's hard to imagine a more provincial statement. We could be a great Scottish city, but instead we'll settle for a lesser version of somewhere else. That said, Aberdeen evidently took

the 'Central Park' line literally, and so the competition was won by the American architects Diller Scofidio & Renfro, designers of New York's High Line Park, strung across a disused freight railway. Their proposal, entitled 'Granite Web', involves a series of billowing mini-hills which will apparently make the park 'greener', despite obliterating its trees.¹⁴ It may end up being an interesting piece of architecture, although it seems radically unsuited to the local climate. The proposal's most counter-intuitive point, though, is to remove the site's actual topography, and to add some fake hills. The word 'Disney' has been used. Still, it's an impressive amount of hoops to leap through for the purpose of yet another shopping mall.



Chapter Sixteen

From Govan to Cumbernauld: Was the Solution Worse than the Problem?

The Moral Second City

In his tract *Architecture and Nihilism*, the ex-Marxist theorist and recent Mayor of Venice Massimo Cacciari makes the claim that ‘the Metropolis’ cannot be an industrial city. It’s administrative, bureaucratic, financial, cultural. What Cacciari was referring to was the ‘Great Cities’ of the early twentieth century, those that were in the vanguards of science and art – Paris, New York, London, above all, Vienna. On the face of it this is a counter-intuitive idea, and not even particularly accurate with regard to the cities he mentions. It’s also odd to hear that Detroit, Manchester or Shanghai were not metropolitan. What Cacciari’s notion does accurately describe, however, is what sort of a city would flourish under late capitalism, and what sort would not. It’s also one possible explanation for the genuinely tragic decline of Glasgow. Not the Second City in population since the 1950s, Greater Glasgow’s population of 1.2 million is only half that of the Metropolitan West Midlands or Greater Manchester; smaller even than the Leeds-Bradford West Yorks sprawl. Devolution has favoured the financial and administrative capital in Edinburgh more than its much larger neighbour to the west. What is surely indisputable, however, is that Glasgow was and remains the architectural, cultural, and, frankly, moral Second City of the UK. It had a chapter in *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, but as that book and this one aver that it *is* the rightful Second City, there is no sensible reason, given that Greater London

has four chapters altogether, that Greater Glasgow should not have two.

The two places covered in this journey both have claims to some kind of independence from Glasgow proper. The first is Govan, a medieval town which became a shipbuilding centre in the nineteenth century, being annexed to the Second City of Empire as late as 1912; the second is the New Town of Cumbernauld, which was populated almost entirely by Glaswegian council tenants from its inception in the late '50s to its completion a decade later. Glasgow, like London, sprouted numerous 'overspill' towns planned by the Labour governments to relieve its chronic overcrowding, once among the worst in Europe. Unlike in London, but like, say, in Liverpool, those New Towns have often been held to account for the drastic decline of the city's national and international status. London did not seriously suffer from the creation of Stevenage, Hatfield, Crawley, Harlow, Basildon and Milton Keynes; its population declined only slightly, making up most of the losses by the end of the century; its hegemonic power was not changed, it simply grew a new, better designed commuter belt. That the creation of Speke, Runcorn and Skelmersdale undermined a Liverpool that lost half its population between the '40s and the '90s is more likely. But Glasgow, which was partly diffused into East Kilbride, Livingston, Irvine and Cumbernauld, could surely claim that its power was thus blunted, that its teeming urban density was emasculated, that it was persistently treated and patronized as a 'problem'. London could point at its East End as the locus of poverty and suffering, and emerge otherwise unscathed. Glasgow was damned en bloc, with the notorious post-war Bruce Report seriously advocating demolishing the entire city. The scorn the rest of the country had for it was amply reflected in compulsive self-hatred.

But there was a rather larger process at work, which it would be foolish to deny. Glasgow was among Europe's first cities to reach the one million mark at the turn of the century – along with Vienna, Berlin, Paris, St Petersburg and Moscow – but it was the only one that was not and never had been an administrative, bureaucratic city. It was a bourgeois city, in the sense that it had what its English equivalents such as Manchester conspicuously

lacked, a middle class that both lived and invested in it; but it was, more than anything else, based on building stuff and making stuff. The industrial decline of the UK necessarily meant the decline of Glasgow. This is often described as a natural, irreversible process, as though it were unavoidable that the city would decline after lower-wage industrial powers emerged in South East Asia and elsewhere. The decades upon decades of refusal to invest in the city and its industries were not, however, inevitable. The two stagnated in tandem. Research and development in technology and heavy industry continued in the late twentieth century, just largely not in Glasgow. So did investment in public infrastructure. London's Underground transport system, for instance, was expanded further and further from the early twentieth century onwards to touch every new suburb, every Enterprise Zone. Glasgow never even got a second tube line, despite its boundaries and council estates extending further into Renfrewshire and Lanarkshire. So we end up with the current situation where, as is luridly reported in recession travelogues, parts of Glasgow have lower life expectancies than besieged Gaza.

The journey described here is an experiment, an attempt to test a hypothesis. Our title derives from a song by the Pet Shop Boys, 'Twentieth Century', which states a common thesis about that era of revolutions. Very bad things existed, and then very bad things would come to replace them. 'I learned a lesson from the Twentieth Century,' sings the Tyneside chansonnier; 'We threw out what was wicked, and threw out what was good as well.' The chorus runs: 'Sometimes, the solution is worse than the problem ... let's stay together.' It's obvious enough what he means. Communism for one, modernist architecture and planning, for another. Strathclyde is abundant in proofs and refutations of this hypothesis, so we start with Govan, a dense and impoverished shipbuilding district, exactly the kind of place from which people were moved into Cumbernauld. The new town's population was intended to be at least 80 per cent Glaswegian in the 1960s, and many of them would surely have hailed from these tenement-lined streets. What makes it an interesting test case, however, is the fact that Govan is relatively intact. Unlike the Gorbals to its east, or the East End on the other side of the Clyde, it was



not subject to wholesale comprehensive redevelopment in the post-war decades; it had been relatively left alone by 1971, when Taransay Street here was among the first working-class tenement areas to be ‘rehabilitated’ by the Glasgow Corporation rather than levelled. Most of its tenements remained, as did its pubs, shops, cinemas, institutes and even its once-independent town hall. What did get built was fairly incremental and timid. Govan even has a still-functioning shipyard. So, although the population density and most obviously the employment has changed very drastically, the physical fabric is much the same as it would have been when Glasgow was among the ten most powerful and populous cities in the world. Cumbernauld is also an interesting test case in that it isn’t an easy punchbag, but somewhere that won numerous awards in its time, and remains to this day more affluent than many of the working-class districts in Glasgow proper. Solution, meet Problem.

The Speculators’ Zenith

The place we start in Govan is Cessnock Subway Station. The Glasgow Subway, under the control of Strathclyde Public

Transport, was recently given a governmental cash injection after a period in which closure was seriously being considered. Not only was this at the same time that Crossrail, DLR extensions and the London Overground were being built in the First City, but also at the time that Glasgow's inner motorway was being belatedly extended, its blue steel-and-concrete flyover now traversing Southside districts with some of the lowest levels of car ownership in the UK. So the Subway survives, still currently with its cute '70s livery and design of brown bricks and curved moulded plastic, entirely intact. That redesign was the last time any real investment was made in high-speed public transport here – just to keep the single line going, never mind extending it. Cessnock, of the same absurdly small proportions as much of the Glasgow underground, has an unusually demonstrative entrance, a square archway with spiky metal outgrowths to deter anyone who might consider climbing it.

The reason we're starting here is that the entrance is built into Walmer Crescent, a development by the architect Alexander 'Greek' Thomson, one of the architects who 'built Glasgow': an internationally influential stylist who took neoclassicism to its limits, creating an intense and robust personal language out of Greek forms that so often lent themselves to mere antiquarianism. Famously, he had never travelled to London, let alone to Greece, though his architectural legacy was taken up as far away as Chicago. Thomson was also a typical Glasgow bourgeois, a keen-eyed property developer, and here he was both developer and architect. Accordingly, Walmer Crescent is a reminder of something now rather hard to imagine – the possibility of property speculation creating coherent, convincing and attractive urbanism, although here as ever in Scotland the feudal legacy should not be discounted. The Crescent itself is harshly cubic in its details, with its masonry cut into rectilinear patterns and recesses, conflicting with the swoop of the curving streetline; the shape and depth of the fenestration contrasts on each level, and the columned top floor, as often with Thomson, is considerably more Egyptian than Greek in its severity. The Crescent is class-segregated, like most Victorian urbanism, with servants' quarters in the basement, but none of it today looks particularly affluent.

The sandstone is handsome but corroding, and in one corner shrubs are growing out of the masonry. This doesn't mask a superbly confident and forthright piece of architecture and urbanism, but reminds you what sort of place you're in.

Coming out of Walmer Crescent, you're in Paisley Road, part of a long artery to the coast, built up by the more workaday kind of speculator. In Glasgow, that's largely a very good thing, at least at our comfortable historical distance. A strongly modelled sandstone sweep takes over here, and doesn't let go. The ingredients are exactly the same as you will find in bourgeois districts like Hillhead – soft sandstone, yellow then deep red, wide and high bay windows, mostly classical details, all on a grid structure of streets, with shops and pubs on ground floors and corners; mostly gardenless, albeit leavened by parks. There are differences, and it would be seriously amiss not to notice them – here the bays are much shallower, the rooms smaller, and the shops and pubs significantly grimmer (although the caffs are almost as good as those near the University). The masonry is also not in the sandblasted, polished and glittering state it can so often be in the West End. As an ensemble, it's still hugely impressive, and the details reward close examination, such as the entranceways to one row of anonymous developers' tenements, which boast rusticated columns that evoke the French utopian architecture of Ledoux.

The corner buildings are often modelled accordingly, pieces of urban punctuation, as at the District Bar pub, where a seemingly classical building bulges upwards into a prickly, columned iron spike. Remember here that in 1919 the government decided that upgrading the quality of beer might help calm the revolutionary ardour of Red Clydeside. I didn't inspect its quality. Around here, the grid starts to offer views of 'iconic' post-industrial, regenerated Glasgow, in the form of two tall, metallic extrusions – the largely ornamental Finnieston crane, the tower of the Glasgow Science Centre, a bow topped with a room for the views. In the foreground are factories. Walk along here for a while, then turn northwards, through Ibrox into the centre of Govan, and these industrial structures start to loom somewhat. The tenements, though, just become even more impressive in their power and elegance, and even more alarming in their state of wear. It's not

the satellite dishes that would excite scorn in the West End, it's the discoloured and rotting masonry – needless to say far worse in the non-‘architectural’ and enduringly grim back-ends of the tenements – but even more than that, the state of the streets themselves. The roads are potholed, grass is growing, and shrubbery emerges in the most unexpected places. Just in the near distance are two of the more elegant Glasgow high-rises, the only two in this part of Govan, both of them in multicoloured brick with glass stairways, a rare example from the spec builders who offered their services and systems to municipalities that doesn't look shameful next to the architectural efforts of Glasgow's nineteenth-century speculators. That the flats inside would have been more spacious, better heated, with toilets, goes without saying.

The point remains, however, that Glasgow's urban fabric is not a great argument for the aesthetics of municipal socialism. The height and elegance of the speculative tenement is here partly supplemented by slightly later reforming efforts. The basic structure is retained, but the differences are very telling, in that they are motivated by humanism and not by aesthetics. You can see them at the corner of Ibrox Street and Whitefield Road. There are three storeys rather than the usual four (to save the back-breaking walks upstairs), no bays but also no basements, and a thin



layer of stone dressing on the frontage, rusticated to make it look more earthy. The pitched roof has not been hidden by a row of battlements or chimneys. There's hedges in front. There's nothing wrong with it, other than the obvious fact that the problem with the earlier tenements – where the look, the public face, was more important than the people living inside – has merely been reversed. Compare them, for instance, with the prospect at the corner of Govan Road and Southcroft Street, where a yellow sandstone block turns the corner with an achingly elegant and modern circular window, leading to a row of skinny red sandstone tenements in enfilade, a melodramatic and memorable vista that could go on for a mile without getting boring. There's a shop on the ground floor, as all the Urban Renaissance documents insisted. A pawn shop.

Nihil Sine Labore

It would be anachronistic to lament much of this, as if you weren't in an area that was built as quick and cheap housing for shipyard workers, crowded in by the ton, with those bays a piddling concession to space in a city where two families to a room was considered acceptable. There is however one obvious absence which helps account for much of the very obvious poverty and decay in Govan, and that's industry, the remnants of which cut a desolate swathe through the residential areas, much as it would have done in the 1890s (so no blaming post-war zoning policies here, thank you). You do see big metal sheds, and sometimes, in amongst the weeds and half-caved-in walls you see things happening in them – Industrial Springs Ltd, vast in corrugated iron with red trim, or Shearer Candles, est. 1897. You also see a lot of obviously unemployed and obviously ill people milling around, waiting for Iain Duncan Smith to procure them a bike for a call-centre job in Edinburgh. That's not to say that Govan hasn't made any attempt to redevelop its industrial sites, as that would be unfair. Weird new-economy colonies are interspersed with the sheds, all of them in a business-park vernacular – yellow brick, red Trespa, fun roofs – that you could find absolutely anywhere, so it's hard to see it as much of a sign of local self-confidence.

Large car parks and in-between spaces stretch alongside. There are few signs, logos or people to help detect what is happening here, nor any notable trace of activity. This, presumably, is the ‘Digital Media Quarter @ Pacific Quay’, or so says a big sign adjacent.

Your eye is immediately taken by two extremely striking things at this point, two markers of Govan’s fluctuating status. Govan Town Hall is on one side. Designed by Paris-trained Beaux Arts architects Thomson & Sandilands in 1897, it’s as impressive as the civic palaces of London Boroughs like Lambeth or Woolwich, probably more so. It’s a conventional design, without much trace of the innovations or mutations of Glasgow’s turn-of-the-century architects like J. J. Burnet, James Salmon or Charles Rennie Mackintosh. What it tries to do is just impress, and it does that amply, with its Roman portico surmounted by Scottish Baronial turrets and an Italian Renaissance dome of especially thumping proportions, all in lush and tactile red sandstone. There are improving quotes on it, such as the Latin legend ‘Nihil Sine Labore’, or Nothing Without Work, a rather bitter choice of phrase. Govan Town Hall isn’t used as a municipal building now, but is instead rented by film companies, who have the most spectacular ready-made set just adjacent should they ever want to make a *Two Nations* film. Just visible through barbed wire on the other side of the road is a place I covered in the previous volume of this work, a dockside regen scheme housing BBC Scotland and the Glasgow Science Centre. I hadn’t realized when I visited it that it was in Govan, that this impressive Victorian urban area was just next door – and this can only partly be blamed on my ignorance. There is simply no connection, physical or otherwise.

Walk around the corner from here and central Govan really hits you, and I mean that in the best possible sense. The faintly late-70s futuristic Govan Subway Station is right at its heart, as it should be, and you can be in the centre of Glasgow in no time. That doesn’t lessen the sense that this would or could be a great centre in and of itself. There is one fantastic building after another: a medieval church, a Victorian Printworks with a bust of the misnamed ‘Guttenberg’, among others, a 1930s moderne cinema (which oddly hides its dereliction with a hoarding showing a photograph

of it in the 1930s), and commercial buildings of serious vigour and presence, linked intimately and inextricably with more streets of tall sandstone tenements; the whole disposed around a triangular public space where you can sit and take it in. The Pearce Institute is the civic focus for it all, and on the day I visit there's a poster, indicating the evening's topics for discussion. 'Central Govan Tenants and Residents: 1. Housing Association Issues (the entire Glasgow housing stock became a charity case a few years ago). 2. Cuts in Public Services. 3. Policing. 4. Factoring.' These offer a pretty clear picture of what is on Govan's mind.

There has been quite a bit of post-industrial development in Central Govan. There's an '80s shopping mall, not as awful as these usually are, avoiding a complete destruction of the urbanism around it, but its blank red-brick lines were surely more at home in Milton Keynes. Slightly more interesting is a residential extension of the centre based on brick, render and metal tenements. At first, it locks itself onto the existing urban structure, continuing a line of Victorian flats, albeit with an uncomfortable blockiness. When it approaches the Clyde, that structure breaks up, but is replaced with nothing worthwhile – driveways and vague, car-centred spaces for the pedestrian. More interesting is a mini-estate designed by Collective Architecture for the Govan Housing Association, in less clichéd materials: a purply brick that goes well with the red all around, and gold-ish panelling. Like many Housing Association areas it can't clearly decide whether it's a new, public-spirited piece of public housing or an aspirational alternative, aimed at affluent outsiders. That's because it's both. A blocky tower and low-rise terraces work their way reasonably intelligently into the urban fabric, although I'm perhaps being kind because of the contrast with a nearby post-war estate, which is a completely typical example of the sad decline of Glasgow architecture after 1945. Just a series of three-storey, grey-rendered tenements with pitched roofs, vaguely arranged around scrubby green spaces, with nothing either positive or negative in them, a nullity, an entropic zone overbearingly invigilated by CCTV. Whoever commissioned these evidently didn't think they lived in one of the world's great cities; his counterparts at Whitehall would surely have agreed.

Reach the Clyde, and there are two enormous grey sheds, on either side of the river. One of them is the Riverside Transport Museum, a back-of-an-envelope design by Zaha Hadid. Amusingly, the best view of it is offered by a kipple-ridden space just off Govan Churchyard. The river is fenced off, and in front of it there's scrub, a sofa, several cushions, plastic bags, rugs, cardboard boxes, shipping containers, bollards, and some parked taxis. The Museum itself is a remarkable engineering feat tailored to the architect's overweening ego, an ethically neo-Victorian design where a prodigious metal structure is immediately masked by a tinny skein. It's a good place to test the architectural avant-garde's pulse, this, as Hadid's partner Patrik Schumacher has described this kind of digitally-enhanced shed-creation as the logical successor to constructivism – a style as appropriate to post-Fordism as modernism was to the post-war consensus. The up-tick logo of the roofline and the effacement of work and technology is an infuriating exercise in whimsy and vacuity, but the Big Shed typology used here is not inappropriate. It's hard to say the Riverside Museum is alien to the urban context.

Just opposite, on the Govan side, is the last remnant of Govan's shipbuilding, the white and blue steel shed of BAE Systems Surface Ships. Deindustrialization is real enough, but in Glasgow as elsewhere it should not be exaggerated. That this survives at all is the eventual result of one of Red Clydeside's most militant actions, one which is especially relevant during the current crisis – the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Work-In, in the early 1970s. Edward Heath's government were determined to let 'lame ducks' die, and the under-invested and under-resourced Clyde shipyards were meant to go away quietly, downsized, closed and sold off to the highest bidder. Instead, Communist shop stewards led a 'work-in', to prove that the yards were viable, and even more importantly perhaps, viable under the control of their workers. In that, they presaged the co-operative autogestion movements that took over factories in Argentina last decade. Largely due to the work-in, the shipyards were nationalized and kept going through the 1980s. The shipyard in Govan was privatized in 1988, and inevitably, it's now operated by a subsidiary of BAE, the arms-dealing behemoth that is arguably neoliberal Britain's

most successful economic entity. It could be argued that this corporation, formed out of several formerly state-owned bodies and aided by great government largesse, is the logical successor for the Clyde's former industrial expertise. BAE Systems Surface Ships has a revenue of over £1 billion. It's hardly struggling. Yet I've often heard it suggested that the cranes of the old shipyards are what you see above the tenements in Govan, rather than those of a working factory for destroyers and attack ships. Here it all still is, hiding in plain sight. It employs far fewer people, and there's the rub, but you can still see ships being built from the Glasgow Harbour luxury flat development, on the other side of the river. Much as it might still weld together warships, there's not much false consciousness on the part of Govan – the SNP's position on the Iraq war didn't stop them electing its deputy leader Nicola Sturgeon as their MSP.

Modern Boys, Modern Girls, It's Tremendous!

You can, if the trains are running on time, get from here to Cumbernauld in about thirty-five minutes. Subway to Buchanan Street, into Queen Street station, then a short journey through north-east Glasgow and a brief, hard-to-spot 'green belt' and you're in the New Town, the alternative, the putative solution to the problem that was and is Govan and the places like it. There is a cheat involved here. We could take a much more circuitous route to the peripheral estates of the Glasgow Corporation, to Easterhouse or Castlemilk, where we could find the nondescript estate off the corner of central Govan reproduced on an enormous scale; but instead we're going to a place which won every architectural award going, and which was immortalized in celluloid in the dizzy teenage utopia of *Gregory's Girl*, a 1981 film which presents an enormously flattering picture of the town, notably by making sure it never presents an exterior shot of its most famous building. More of that later. Cumbernauld has roughly the same population – around 60,000 – as many of the outlying Glasgow estates, although again, we find a poor argument for local government and democracy.¹⁵ The elected Glasgow Corporation too often created sloughs of despond, formed as if by accident;

the unelected quango that was the Cumbernauld Development Corporation managed to create something that, it is soon evident, was taken very seriously, with great sensitivity clear at every level of the design. That shouldn't have to be true, and in, say, the contrast between the GLC or Hatfield Development Corporation, it wasn't, but here the unflattering difference (you'll have passed Sighthill and Red Road on the train up) is undeniable.

The first sight of Cumbernauld as you exit the rather meek SPT station is intriguing – an axial progression of terraces, with an underpass placed in the middle. The one non-‘new’ building, a rustic row of shops with a café, is off to the side, but it's as if it has been put there for reassurance. The district nearest the station is called Carbrain, and like most of Cumbernauld it is fairly low-rise. Cumbernauld was a ‘mark two new town’, so it took into account the criticisms that were applied to the Attlee government's efforts, from Stevenage to East Kilbride, which were thought too dispersed, too suburban, too monofunctional. The other major ‘mark two’ town is Milton Keynes, a place specifically designed so that you could drive through it without noticing, with nothing originally allowed to be taller than the tallest tree – a faintly psychotic way to design a town, though frequently rather elegant if you get out of the car. Cumbernauld wisely didn't go as far as this, but it introduced a road system that presaged its Buckinghamshire relative, where the pedestrian does not at any point have to cross a road, and the driver never has to wait at a traffic light. To your right is a row of six-storey tenements, with a svelte pedestrian bridge protruding from them. They're in what you soon find is the dominant Cumbernauld material, brick with grey render, which unfortunately is usually stained or otherwise discoloured. At the roof, the brick takes over, forming around curious semicircular windows. There's snow on the ground. It feels a little bit like the outskirts of Kiev.

In front of you, however, is the signposted route to the town centre, so it is in this direction that we proceed. A greensward surrounds the underpass, with long grey terraces rising one after another, on a hill. Within a few minutes you've already seen more greenery and felt more space than you would in an hour in Govan, and evidently that was the point. The underpass itself has

been ‘designed’, with faceted little panels, and it’s very wide and spacious. The houses display a design which at first it’s hard to decide is clever or stupid. They’re again in grey render on brick, they have pitched roofs, and they are very, very small, albeit with larger windows than the Glasgow municipal norm. To the back of each row is a garage, though cars are still parked in the street. But why, you wonder, have they basically recreated the Victorian terrace on an even smaller scale? Just outside of Glasgow, of all places? Soon you notice two clever things. Each terrace on the hill has been arranged with its neighbour, above and below, in mind. Every view upwards or downwards is surprising, with odd angles and views of the hills just outside the town. The pedestrian principle is especially pleasing here, with the whole thing unmarred by the slightest hint of traffic. Then you notice the landscaping, which is heavy, great big cobbles of rubble set into all the places you’re not meant to walk, but without resorting to fences or spikes; occasionally with boulders dropped onto them. A wonderful way to design something this simple – we’d rather you didn’t step here, but if you’re going to, we won’t stop you. And immediately, the craggy, mountainous, northern topography has been taken into the design of the most basic built fabric.

The absence of certain things you see a lot of in Govan starts to become felt. There are no shops, by which I don’t just mean a lack of bookies and pawn shops, but of any shop at all. No pubs, either. I stumble instead onto a Free Church, a modern design in wood and harling that doesn’t appear to have been touched since 1975, with very neat typography. Up to this point I’ve been following the signs to Cumbernauld town centre, but then the route is blocked by a new development of exurban-looking houses in closes, and the sign doesn’t have anything to say about this. So I try to skirt it, passing another, bigger church, again of very modern design, and a secondary school, and a heart-in-mouth view of the ensemble billowing downwards. After a while of this I worried I might end up getting terminally lost here, so retraced my steps and took another route entirely (the earlier sign was more permissive), through a park.

There was a townscape of genius at work here. The landscape architect of Cumbernauld was one G. P. Youngman, and much

of what made this walk especially enjoyable can be put down to his talents. A winding pedestrian path weaves through what you abruptly realize is not, in fact, a park at all, but what Cumbernauld has instead of streets – hillocks on each side, a wooden walkway, thickets of trees. You could be in a nature reserve, or one of those BedZed-style eco-buildings extruded out to form a town, but you definitely couldn't be on a street. This, in theory, is bad. Streets encourage life and stuff. Take away proper streets, and chaos and mugging apparently ensues. Yet I saw as many people on this path as I did on Govan Road, and they didn't look especially menacing, although one told me I wouldn't find much to photograph round here. That Glasgow municipal self-esteem problem moved here, too.

The houses vary wildly in their treatments, although they were all designed of a piece, by the development corporation. Their lead architect, Hugh Wilson, was co-creator of the Arndale Centre in Manchester, but like his partner, Sheffield Municipal Architect Lewis Womersley, he deserves better than to be remembered for it. The two architects seemed to share a great deal – the only place I've been that combines such total modernity with intense local and topographical specificity to this degree is the Gleadless Valley in Sheffield. The houses, now, are less neo-back-to-back than those downhill. They've got gardens, but they also look more modern and more crisp. Some are worn and almost derelict, some in fine nick, with no obvious pattern as to why and wherefore, no obvious slum area or affluent area (that, too, was deliberate). Right to Buy obviously hit Cumbernauld fairly hard. Perhaps the only real caveat about this place is that it'd be a little tricky for the unfit, and I find myself slightly out of breath from all the ups and downs. At the underpass, stairs go up to a bus stop, but not to a road; pass through and you're finally at the town centre.

Adapt and Destroy

Now, if it weren't for three grey tower blocks in the near distance, you really could be in Milton Keynes, but for the aggressive Strathclyde-in-January weather. That careful urban structure you've just walked through is replaced with a large surface car

park. The landscape has gone from being fascinating and unique to being a landscape that you have seen in a million different places, a million times. Retail sheds on the motorway; a Tesco Extra, with another even bigger car park in front; a PFI college, with a Blair Hat on top; a covered shopping mall. The golden arches look out over all of it, and for the first time so far, you spy a CCTV camera. There are other things, more clearly of the era, to be seen. Non-avant-garde modernism is represented in offices for Lanarkshire Council, low-rise and smart, and a larger, vaguer brown brick block; the avant-garde are represented in another college building, a worn but imaginative and clear Brutalist cruiser designed by Andy MacMillan and the late Isi Metzstein. Clever bits of landscaping and pedestrian routing can be found in amongst all the subtopian vagueness, but really, you're clutching at straws. Its contrast with the centre of Govan, never mind the centre of Glasgow, is in no way flattering. So how, you would be right in asking yourself, did this end up being the centre of a town which up till now appeared so sensitively and thoughtfully designed?

Cumbernauld town centre was originally supposed to be one single building, of a sort. Its designer, Geoffrey Copcutt, proposed for the site a 'megastructure', which was to rise out of the topography as a great rocky outcrop. Megastructures were a mid-1960s Big Idea, a rearrangement and radicalization of modernism into huge, allegedly adaptable and extendable organisms that provided all the density, diversity and life so palpably absent from many of the more Platonic modernist showpieces. Habitat '67 in Montreal is probably the most famous; the Brunswick Centre and arguably the Barbican in London show traces of it, as does Castle Market in Sheffield. Japanese architects specialized in megastructures for a while. There's an obvious problem with them as theory, which is the combined attempt to provide a clear and legible image in a fixed and heavy material, usually reinforced concrete, and at the same time provide something light, adaptable and changeable; but if managed well enough there is no reason why a megastructure should not work. Shopping mall owners may not be the ideal clients for such an entity.

So Copcutt's town centre was built to include pubs, libraries,



welfare centres, restaurants, nightclubs, bowling alleys, shops, bus station, offices, and had a row of penthouses at the top. The architect intended a few other things too, which never quite came to pass: there was apparently ‘a mosaic of sites I had tucked in for flea-markets’¹⁶ in there somewhere, as well as space for hotels. You now realize that the absence of pubs and shops in the residential areas was not entirely stupid, as the entire town was planned round this place, with the intention that nowhere would be more than a fifteen-minute walk from its metropolitan bustle. When pondering it, you have to keep in mind the Apollonian grids of most post-war New Towns, their clear and neat pedestrian precincts without much in the way of drama, complexity or conflict. You have to think of a rainy day in Billingham, as that’s the sort of thing the architects had in mind as what they wanted not to achieve. Nonetheless, the main event, as in any New Town, was evidently the shopping, and it’s that which caused the downfall of Copcutt’s idea. If it was a shopping mall, and an unsuccessful one at that (at first), then it was to be judged on those terms. For that he cannot quite be blamed; although the choice of bare concrete in weather like this was perhaps unwise, if not without a certain craggy grandeur.

All this at first is fairly academic, as walking round the car parks in the town centre you can't at first find any trace of Copcutt's original building – the structure which won 'worst building in the UK' awards for a decade or more, the place memorably described in the Poujadist television spectacular *Demolition* as 'a concrete spaceship from the planet Crap'. It's hard to hide a building this big, but they've almost succeeded. You have to walk to the corner between the blank, pink-walled Antonine Centre (the Roman Wall ran nearby) and the typically sub-Foster Tesco Extra, where you'll see it just above the service areas and the lorries, the long row of porthole-windowed penthouses raised up on one prodigious piloti. They're still inhabited, apparently. It's infinitely more interesting than the shopping centre and the supermarket as a work of architecture, though its ferocity is hard to deny. Walk up some stairs, miraculously still public, and the sight is genuinely shocking. It's like a concrete shanty town, with a series of seemingly random cubic volumes 'plugged in' to the larger structure, all of them in a drastic state, their concrete frames with brick infill looking half-finished, which alarmingly may have been intentional. One of these pods has a little doorway into a branch of William Hill, which is possibly the single bleakest thing I have seen in composing this book. After that, you realize where you are – the service areas of the building, so at the point where glass walkways carry pedestrians, and the only reason for you to be here is to wait for a bus. Walk into the bus station, and the surfaces are lined with mosaic and tile, and you realize that somewhere hidden in all this is a space designed with as much love and intelligence as the housing around it. It's damned hard to see it, underneath all that has followed since.

This, again, is in some ways the fault of the original idea. Those walkways are passing into a row of long, featureless and windowless sheds, the kind of ultra-rationalized non-architecture that the strongly modelled and sculptural skyline of the original town centre building is clearly trying to stop in its tracks, to eliminate before it destroyed architecture as a discipline entirely. Copcutt must have realized that the most truly adaptable buildings, those capable of transforming themselves with the same speed as society and production were transforming in the 1960s,

were Big Boxes, where partitions inside and walls outside could be fabricated, removed, moved and expanded with great ease. His move, and the megastructural move more generally, was to try and create a form of building that could do all of those things and still be as vivid, interesting, diverse and architecturally pleasing as the historical city, without of course reproducing it. They must have seen themselves as a last line of defence, and in a sense they were, and that's how we ended up with Zaha Hadid's Riverside Museum. The sheds swallow up the architecture here, that's for sure, but they also prove the original building's capacity for adaptation, as they all are still part of the same organism, still all connected. Inside, there's not much to feel optimistic about. This intrinsically adaptable building has indeed been adapted, as was intended, just as it has been expanded. The original high ceilings were lowered to the usual shopping mall level, with the usual '80s fibreglass neoclassicism all around. There are several different pound shops.

One aspect of the original design that surely hasn't changed is the occasionally baffling complexity. Like many cities (but unlike Glasgow), the structure and plan is completely illegible to the outsider, and the map placed to 'help' the pedestrian is more than slightly terrifying. After a while, you realize there are at least three malls here. One is Copcutt's original, with its narrow, arcade-like structure, which might once have been enjoyable; another, slightly later, a big box with a space frame roof; and then the new Antonine Mall. This is reached via a weird and empty passageway, with nothing but beige walls for company until you come to an enormous mock-Victorian clock, screened off by a glass wall in case anyone would want to vandalize it. I felt like having a crack myself.¹⁷ The shops here are nicer, cleaner, proper normal retail chains like you would get in a normal mall. Next, Costa, Dunnes. After this I walk out and get completely lost trying to exit the complex. Copcutt's scheme, its majesty and folly still palpable, looms proudly out over the car parks and the mess, and then you find yourself at another entrance, a glazed atrium of classic 2000s form (wavy roof, Wetherspoons and all). Next to it are statues: 'The Shopper', from 1981, by Bill Scott, presents a mother and baby in bronze. She looks lost too. After

lots of wandering, I get out, to somewhere every bit as gorgeous as the area I'd found myself in on my way to the shopping centre.

Scotland, Scandinavia

Maybe it's the relief at finally finding my way out of the town centre, but I don't think so. The northern suburbs of Cumbernauld are glorious, an architectural triumphal march that doesn't stop until you eventually wind your way back to the town centre (it is, after all, built like that). You take some stairs up onto a ridge. A path leads off it, lined thickly with trees – a forest planted just next to the town centre, coursing between the estates. The tall trees are then dispersed across an area of houses spilling down a valley, all with gently pitched roofs, and tightly planned pedestrian paths running through them – again, you can pass through several 'streets' without having to cross a road. There's a little modernist church, in slightly better condition than the one in Carbrain, though there's still something unpleasantly Temperance or philanthropic about the way Cumbernauld's residential areas are planned around parish churches rather than pubs, cafés or leisure centres. There's a school just next door, a straightforward ribbon-windowed box. The houses are geometrically organized, with weatherboarded links between pebble-dashed masonry, but not in the sense of subsuming everything into a pattern, so much as informal, pretty, even. Three tower blocks in the distance lie beyond a concrete underpass, detailed in a raw *béton brut* that fits perfectly with the roughness of the landscape and the landscape architecture. Passing under it feels entirely logical, a pathway under a main road than doesn't even feel like an underpass. It is a feat to design infrastructure with such a degree of seeming informality and ease. There are new, mid-rise blocks of flats just by the underpass; architecturally, their mild-modernism is fairly appropriate, but the most obvious difference has been the collapse of these carefully, ingeniously planned in-between spaces. They're just blocks with car parks in front. Wasn't that what the 1960s was blamed for?

Through all this you're walking downhill, and at the bottom of the hill is Seafar, an estate of tower blocks and terraces. The

three towers are in exactly the right place, enhancing the already vivid sense of enclosure and warmth in this woody, bosky area. They too are arranged around a car-parking area, although there the similarities end. The New Town was designed with the assumption that each household would own a car, and whether we consider that a good thing or not, Hugh Wilson and the town's architects tried to achieve the seemingly impossible – to design a dense, coherent, non-suburban town that had a huge amount of car parking while being accessible and pleasant for the pedestrian. So the parking is arranged into a circular concrete garage, like a crescent of bungalows for vehicles. That's not the most impressive thing – what takes over here is Youngman's landscaping at its most crazy and baroque – the winding path round the garages to the towers has at its edges a sculptural sweep of raised cobbles, so organic and bulging that it looks more like an abstract sculpture than a type of paving. Truly, Cumbernauld boasted the Gaudi of pavements.

Turning left from the towers, there's a development of terraces, again stepping sharply down the valley; in between there is bosky, Nordic planting. The grey and brown houses look completely of this landscape, completely of their place, without at all evoking any specific Scottish form of architecture, neither baronial castles nor tenements. The paving is set at angles down the hill, with the cubic, Bauhaus-Caledonia houses set at angles, with bushes at the corners. Thin trees rise out of them. These communal green strips are again demarcated by melodramatic landscaping – more boulders crashed down here and there, as a small reminder not to walk on them that doesn't need 'keep off the grass' signs. Walk up the hill a little bit and you can see snow-capped mountains in the near distance. There's a small plaque at the end of one of the terraces: 'Saltire Society Award for Good Design, 1963'. It's not unusual to find old Civic Trust plaques on neglected, rotting post-war buildings, but though a *Wallpaper** reader might blanch at some of the porches and additions made by residents to their terraces, surely this place has been used in exactly the manner in which it was intended. The contrast with the town centre is overwhelming. How unusual that it's working-class housing rather than a shopping centre that best represents the place's local pride.



Walking back towards the town centre, the houses lie more dramatically into the landscape, with especially steep pitched roofs set in rows. The town centre buildings look marginally less horrible from this angle, less subtopian, with at least some hint of the original ideas, where you see Copcutt's concrete extrusions passing over a main road with another small, conservative modern church next to it. From here, an underpass to Kildrum, another of the 1960s areas of the New Town. The underpass offers views of some typical Cumbernauld employers – Fujitsu, the Inland Revenue, both evidently taking advantage of the low rent and motorway connections, much as they would in Stevenage. Like most New Towns, Cumbernauld was built up largely, if not exclusively, with council housing, but either employment patterns or the Right to Buy has made much of it look unexpectedly affluent; turn your eye back to the view of the town centre, though, and it's hard to credit it. The worn concrete megastructure and its big-box parasites look drastically sick. The underpass is, like the rest of the landscaping, designed in a heavy, rustic, organic pattern, filtering the pedestrian under the motorways to the centre with great tectonic gusto. Then you're at another series of terraces placed downhill. This time, the clipped modern designs and

the density of wintry trees seriously evoke a northerly version of what we'd seen at New Ash Green. There are bungalows off the main pathway, under the trees. There are worn but elegant metal shelters along the road adjacent, with cars parked in them. At the end of it, the underpass to the next estate has taken the organicism to comic heights – a gaping maw, a practically medieval archway. By this point I've gotten myself lost again, and ask for directions. I'm told, kindly enough, that if I don't know the town I'd be better off taking a bus. The bus stop is out of service.

So I decide instead to go for another walk, to test the theory that everywhere is no more than fifteen minutes from the town centre. Forest paths lead to a striking, verdigris-clad factory. Then, uphill, more houses with steep pitched roofs and bulky landscaped pedestrian paths, their peaks and falls accentuating the drama of the topography. There are new additions in between, in a nondescript suburban vernacular, again punctuated by nothing but car parks, but it's small enough to ignore. Through the town centre again (quicker than I had expected, evidently it's not *that* hard to get used to) and walked back to the station through Carbrain, with more elegant, dense housing that seems to have gone to seed faster than most of the rest of the town. At Greenfaulds Crescent, you find the only part of the New Town that seems to have followed a 'normal' street pattern, with cars parked on a street with houses facing each other on either side. It doesn't seem any more or less successful than the rest of it, despite being the only part that contemporary town planning wisdom would consider sensible or even feasible.

The paradox of Cumbernauld is how such a well-kept and captivating residential town can have allowed its town centre to have become such a subtopian horror. That might be to do with the basic vagueness of the New Town idea in the first place. If it's seen, as it easily could be, as a far-northern suburb of Glasgow, then it doesn't matter so much that central Cumbernauld is a disaster; if it's seen as the heart of a distinct town with its own identity (something it undoubtedly possesses), then the absence is a very serious urban defect. Did it 'solve' the problems of Victorian Glasgow, though? It certainly avoided every possible urban pattern of Glasgow, without the slightest trace of the tenement

tradition, and without the tiniest hint of the Chicago-style metropolitan brashness of the Second City; but, unlike most of Glasgow's own estates, Cumbernauld replaced what it destroyed with something positive, something with its own pattern, its own locality. There's no reason why both can't peacefully coexist. Not that the New Town should be seen as some admirable but misguided experiment. About halfway through my walk through Cumbernauld, I realized I'd only seen anything similar on the outskirts of Stockholm, where forests and lakes are interspersed with sensitive, cleverly landscaped working-class housing. Given that the Scottish Nationalist left like to hold up the surviving Welfare State consensus in Norway or Sweden as their exemplar for the Scottish Republic (as opposed to other feasible comparisons, like Ireland or Iceland), that's very apt. Here is a New Town which looks on brief acquaintance like an exceptionally successful piece of social democratic, Scandinavian urbanism, a place that an Alvar Aalto or a Sven Markelius would recognize as kin. Its mistakes are obvious, and rectifiable. We could imagine it becoming a model for the new settlements of an independent, leftist, intensely local Scotland. Though England may face a Tory hegemony forever when Scotland secedes, it's hard not to wish them luck.



Chapter Seventeen

Belfast: We Are Not Going Away

From our Foreign Correspondent

Ireland, of course, is not Britain. The *Morning Star* newspaper always runs reportage from Belfast with the proviso 'from our foreign correspondent'. Belfast has a place in a book which claims to deal with 'urban Britain' only in the sense that it's still part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so any reader who is irked by its inclusion should bear in mind that it is used on these strictly limited grounds. And no offence is intended when I say that the first feeling when in the Northern Irish capital is one of intense familiarity, and that after two visits, that feeling stuck. Intense familiarity is an understatement, in fact. Belfast appears as a place which has faced every single one of the problems that have beset British cities for the last half-century. Depopulation of the inner city and ballooning of exurbs, drastic deindustrialization, the favouring of the car and hence neglect of public transport, ring roads that brutally sever the poor from the centre, furiously divided communities, walls, fences and gates around residential areas, 1980s riverside Enterprise Zones, post-1997 redevelopment of ex-industrial space into cultural centres and luxury apartments, rise of the inner-city shopping mall, urban riots ... Belfast has been subject to every one of these, to a ferocious degree. The curious thing is that it has suffered them for entirely different reasons, at least on the face of it.

Guilty Labour voters in the 2000s in the UK would often mull over the reasons why they were putting their 'x' where they were,

and come up with a short list. ‘The minimum wage ... working families tax credit ... Sure Start ... oh yeah, and peace in Northern Ireland.’ A Tory Party occasionally known as the Conservative and Unionist Party was never going to be able to achieve the latter, but Blair (or rather, Mo Mowlam with a bit of last-minute grandstanding from Peter Mandelson) did genuinely appear to end three decades of low-intensity civil war. As a measure of that success, in a few years Provisional IRA weapons were handed in, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness were sharing jokes, the RUC no longer officially existed, and everything was apparently going to get back to normal, whatever that might be. At this distance, you have to go back and read anything written between the 1920s and the 1990s to realize just how completely unexpected this outcome would once have seemed. Obviously, most of us thinking this thought while going to the polls hadn’t ever been to Northern Ireland (I certainly hadn’t), gave barely a damn about whether it stayed part of the UK (it’s hard to imagine any British government not reliant on Unionist support caring much), and experienced it only via the mainland bombing campaigns of the early-to-mid-90s, on much-loved landmarks like Canary Wharf and the Manchester Arndale. As Patrick Keiller notes of his wandering Londoners in 1992, *they didn’t seem to think that what was happening in Ireland had anything to do with them.*

All that said, when talking about Belfast, and Belfast’s built fabric, it would be crass to simply take aim at the mess it has made of itself, as if it hadn’t relatively recently recovered from three decades of urban warfare. It’s possible that buildings like the Waterfront Hall, St Anne’s Square or the Obel Tower genuinely symbolize to many people here the fact that they can now walk the streets with any but the most residual fear of car bombs, let alone routine assassinations and beatings. The Phoenix-from-the-Ashes public art is as bad here as everywhere else, if not worse, but different criteria surely exist when a city really has emerged from what Belfast has emerged from. All that said, with all those caveats ... Belfast remains an extremely unnerving, disconcerting and disturbing city, a nightmarish vision of what most British cities could quite easily become, what lies just around the corner for them. That vision is taken out of a context in which it’s

actually an improvement, to be sure – so that should be borne in mind in what follows.

A Colonial Composite

Belfast looks at first like a ‘regenerated’ northern English industrial city, and a very impressive one. It’s bigger and grander than most, proud and demonstrative in its architecture – a Leeds or even a Manchester, rather than a Preston or a Wakefield. Initial acquaintance shows a city a great deal more familiar, in fact, than anything in Scotland or even much of Wales. This might be because it’s the protracted consequence of an annexation and a plantation, unlike the relatively equitable Unions with the UK’s other two Celtic countries. That is, it’s colonial: something supported by the astounding scale of Belfast City Hall, an Edwardian baroque municipal palace of stupendous grandiosity and bulk, centred around an immense Wren-like dome, comparable with the colonial administrative cathedrals of New Delhi, Mumbai or Durban (the latter was apparently an exact copy). The architect, Alfred Brumwell Thomas, specialized in these civic monstrosities, designing versions for Stockport and Woolwich, but neither is as massive and overpowering as this. As a piece of urban planning, it’s as authoritarian as can be, but not ineffective. Central Belfast is a gridiron, like those other Victorian shipbuilding centres Glasgow and Barrow, and City Hall is placed right at the heart of it. Around it, in Donegall Square, are commercial buildings that emulate its scale, insurance offices in the most pompous and invigorating twilight-of-empire fashion.

That’s not all that looks familiar – in fact, combined colonization by the English and the Scots seems to have brought a certain amount of equal importation from each. Belfast’s earlier incarnation as Linenopolis, a textile centre to rival those of Yorkshire and Lancashire, has left several Ruskinian red-brick/Venetian warehouses and mills in the centre. In the south of the grid, their height, their intense colour, and their sheer walls give a dramatic effect reminiscent of Whitworth Street in Manchester or Little Germany in Bradford. There’s a lot of infill that mostly follows the height and streetline, hotels and office blocks of little



imagination but which don't disrupt the effect. The turn-of-the-century shipbuilding metropolis has left buildings that could easily have escaped from the Glasgow grid, classical and baroque structures in red sandstone imported from Dumfries. There's a fine progression of them in one corner. The first, on a dramatic corner site, is Bank Buildings, designed in 1900 by W. H. Lynn (designer, as we've seen, of Barrow Town Hall) – sandstone on a steel frame with wide, protomodernist plate-glass windows, a building that many a British city would be envious of, that wouldn't look out of place on either Buchanan Street or Piccadilly, currently with the exalted status of housing Primark. The Central Library, almost next door and also by Lynn, is similarly Glaswegian in its strongly moulded sandstone classicism; then the Leeds-esque mills take over again. Some of the more dignified classical buildings in the centre, such as Hamilton Street or the Custom House, evoke the disciplined eighteenth-century planning of Dublin, as if to redress the balance.

The second half of the twentieth century has granted Belfast a similar bequest to other towns that got rich on heavy engineering and textiles. There's a slightly too sober but very well-made bank by BDP, who kept an office here throughout the Troubles; there's a good Festival Style block with Scando patterns and

zigzag balconies, and there's a few not especially interesting speculative office blocks, rightly proud and soaring but devoid of ideas or expressiveness. The comparisons cease to be with northern England and western Scotland by this point, they're more with Birmingham. Belfast's 1980s and 90s buildings are masonry structures on concrete frames, in the sort of blocky, rather coarse postmodernism that you see so often in the centre of the official Second City. At times, when walking round some of the more extensively redeveloped central districts, it's only the weather and the mountains in the near distance that remind you you're not in the West Midlands, or in the more historic areas, the West Riding. The geography, at least, is very local.

By the second day in Belfast you start to register something different in the centre. A 1980s building like the BBC's Northern Ireland department, designed in 1984 by the BBC's in-house architects, employs what to the untrained eye might look like a standard piece of postmodernist vernacular, albeit with art deco rather than Victoriana as the inspiration for its rectilinear mannerisms. Then you gradually realize you're looking at a blast wall, at a structure expressly designed to withstand car bombs. There are many approaches to this problem. The Europa Hotel, bombed an impressive twenty-seven times, is from a distance a fairly normal V-shaped mass of commercial modernism, but up close it's hard to avoid the weird Vegas-like vestibule: a series of bizarre columned spaces which must either have doubled as a screen against bombs, or been imposed as a celebration of the fact that there aren't any bombs any more. You don't see much built in glass until pretty recently, for obvious reasons. The earliest is BDP's 1991 Castle Court shopping mall, a somewhat Richard Rogers-ish piece of bulky high-tech, with ornamental steel frame and a strangely placed short brick wall blocking off one side of it. It's not until my second visit that I realize that here I was walking obliviously past the city centre's only 'peace line'. The most confident post-war (the recent war, that is) structure is Victoria Square, again by BDP, a complex which is a comprehensive redevelopment by any other name. Much of it is taken up by a shopping mall with a large glass dome, to complement those on Donegall Square, with what must have been intended as a hint at the Reichstag and the

post-Wende rhetoric of non-ideological ‘transparency’. There’s pseudo-public access through, and a superb view from the top of the dome. The scheme expands round the street to encompass some inner-city urban regen housing, in the form of a long street block with a tall tower. The architectural language is about right, a slightly Brutalist, vigorous red brick, although the jagged roof is a very early-2000s mannerism. It’s not that hard to make a transparent shopping mall; a transparent law courts is a different problem. The Laganside Courts, opened in 2002, were designed by Hurd Rolland; their website claims they are ‘one of the leading national practices in the law and order sector’. The building has a conspicuous lack of any but the tiniest windows, which suggests that certain things are not changing. There’s a supergrass trial in progress on my second trip here.

Our Legacy, Your Future

Towards the River Lagan, there’s a very nice juxtaposition. On one side, the Victoria Clock Tower, a leaning Gothic folly that, local drollery notes, ‘has both the time and the inclination’. Opposite is the city centre’s best post-war building, J. J. Brennan’s Transport House, a tower and wing clad in green tiles with a magnificent constructivist mosaic running down the façade depicting ships, cranes, and robotic workers marching towards the socialist future that evidently didn’t come to pass, in an era where the biggest workers’ action was the sectarian syndicalism of the Ulster Workers’ Council strike in 1974. As a reminder of ideals that have had purchase here at certain times – from the United Irishmen in the 1790s to the solidarity strikes with Red Clydeside in 1919 – it’s not just an interesting building, it’s an important one. Transport House was occupied until recently by the T&G’s successor Unite, who should be ashamed for abandoning this building; the thought of them now occupying some business park in ‘Greater Belfast’ is faintly heartbreaking.

Walk on a bit from here and the grid’s coherence is replaced by the mess of speculation. That’s especially sharp where the Westlink slices across the city, an urban motorway comparable in its destructive effect to the M8 more than the Westway, leaving

a straggling landscape in its wake. It takes trains as well as cars at one point, which makes it feel even more weird and futuristic, with both crossing each other at angles. Under its riverside flyover you have a series of more or less derelict workshops, a basketball court, and a fence. In the distance is the New Lodge Flats, an estate of towers that recently featured in a Rihanna video, of all things. Each zigzag roof is marked by a portrait of a Republican hunger striker, though that wasn't so clear on MTV Base. The fence itself carries a partially defaced graffito, where certain letters have been meticulously crossed out. It reads: '----- G----- HAS TO ANSWER --- ---- ----'. Local artist Daniel Jewesbury, showing me around, informs me this previously read 'BARRY GILLIGAN HAS TO ANSWER FOR THIS LAND', and refers to the chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, who is also a director at property developers Big Picture Developments.¹⁸ He has to 'answer for this land' because it was zoned as social housing. In 2010, in his other job as policing adviser, Gilligan was allegedly asked by a Housing Association to advise on a 'design issue'; then his company snapped up the land, outbidding the Housing Association.

Visible from here at one point is the St Anne's Square, a development designed by neoclassicist John Smylie. It's a ridiculous building, an ill-proportioned neo-Georgian car park that becomes an enclosed 'Palladian' courtyard, with detailing so cack-handed it makes Paternoster Square look like Aldo Rossi. Whatever else might be said about their recent architecture, it's hard to imagine Birmingham or Glasgow standing for this. A short distance from here and you're in Laganside, the obligatory riverside brownfield Disneyland. It's the same as any other 1980s Enterprise Zone, a Cardiff Bay or a Salford Quays, operated by a quango outside of local government control, with a tamed river created by a concrete weir whose slightly Thames Barrier-like forms make it probably Laganside's best building. The possibility of extending inner Belfast's coherent, legible grid was either rejected or never even considered, so the place is a collection of disconnected towers from different eras.

Era One, the BT tower and the Hilton Hotel, is still fortified, stock-brick-clad with ground-floor blast walls. The post-Good

Friday agreement Era Two is more optimistic, its spec residential towers boasting lots of glass and extraneous bits and bobs, like The Boat flats' brightly coloured picture frames, randomly hung onto the curtain wall. Like a lot of 2000s buildings, it's going to look interesting when the cladding starts falling off. The domed Waterfront concert hall is a tad more civic, but turns its back on the river. There's a twin-tower job in blue glass, left derelict after the financial crash that beset the south of this island even more than the other one. On the ground, Laganside is chaotic, with no coherent riverside walk. Public art entails a sprite-like steel maiden holding up a ring, or an arch, or something, at the entrance to the city from the river. This place has some sort of record for nominations to *Building Design's* Carbuncle Cup award. In 2010 alone were put forward The Boat and Broadway Malyan's Obel Tower, the tallest building in Ireland (the best of this bad bunch, to be fair, as its east façade has some grace), plus St Anne's Square. The latter was surely robbed of victory only by the fact none of the judges had seen it first-hand. Just before it was wound up, the Laganside company put up a panel listing its achievements, with the chilling words used in the heading to this section above. The abiding impression of familiarity is not in any way dispelled by the fact that every architectural change can be related to a change in the level of conflict; as it would be, in a city where every new development between the mid-70s and the 2000s had to receive the specific approval of the British Army. The fact remains that in London, Birmingham or Manchester you can equally find a 1980s–90s brick-clad postmodernism giving way to a confident, glazed new modernism from the late '90s onwards, seemingly solely due to changes in architectural fashion. Exactly the same thing, for apparently different reasons.

Ulster Defensible Space Association

What is described above is not so extreme, not so unusual. Stick to the centre and the only disturbing thing about the Belfast landscape is the lowest-common-denominator approach to redevelopment; its sins are the sins of other cities. Things are different once you go beyond the ring road. Drastically so. Inner Belfast,

conveniently due to the Westlink, is demarcated by a cordon sanitaire of wasteland and surface car parks, with the odd marooned terrace of Victorian houses. It just serves to make the change more glaring. It's not the most obvious barrier, though, in a city which has in one estimation forty-eight 'peace lines'. The most famous of these is in West Belfast. The Shankill and Falls are a very short walk away from the centre, but the scarred spaces you have to go through to get there make it seem considerably longer. The road leads you over a very, very busy motorway, and then a jolly little angel with outstretched arms on a plinth informs you that you are entering the Shankill. The low quality of Belfast public art has its reasons, it's soon clear – best to keep it neutral. When you first see the Loyalist Murals in the Shankill, you suspect they're being kept for tourists; there are black cab tours and everything. Belfast's equivalent to the *City of God* tours of Brazilian favelas, or an open-topped bus round the ruins of Detroit: the exploitation and, hopefully, neutralization of former sources of conflict and humiliation. On closer investigation it's obvious that the notion that these are mere remnants for show is no more true of sectarianism than it's true of shanty towns or industrial decline. This stuff is not a joke.

The Shankill, like most working-class areas of Belfast, was redeveloped from the 1980s onwards in a manner which illuminates the roots of what is usually called 'defensible space' planning. There are tiny, neo-Victorian houses in looping, intricate cul-de-sacs, providing vague, hostile, car-centred pedestrian spaces and a grim visual straggleness. Their many blank gable ends leave plenty of room for Oliver Cromwell, William of Orange, the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association. These kinds of paintings have been reclassified lately as 'folk art', which no doubt they are, in the sense in which Communist composer Hanns Eisler distinguished between reactionary 'folk' songs and revolutionary 'mass' songs. The glasses, moustaches and turletenecks of the 1980s are immortalized in the portraits of various gunwielders, but these murals know they're being looked at and consumed. Some of them have notes on them, explaining otherwise esoteric symbolism such as the Red Hand of Ulster. One less inflammatory mural features the apposite words, 'whatever

is about us not with us is not for us'. Windswept, unclaimed open space runs between the artworks. There's a lot of graffiti as well as the murals, but of an unusual sort. Most of it isn't even tags, but people scrawling their initials, so often and so densely that it looks like many of the streets have been randomly scribbled over. The houses are relatively new, but they look bitterly poor. A dour, brown-brick leisure centre tries to keep the kids busy, and on the Shankill Road itself, Union Jack bunting flutters in the wind. How can somewhere so evidently screwed over by successive governments of the United Kingdom find itself able to be *proud* of it?

The Interface Zone between the Shankill and Falls is fairly permeable. A fence running alongside a large flour mill is not so unusual; I later found that the fence is closed at night, but when it's open you might not bat an eyelid, but for the accompanying symbolism. The two areas are divided by an industrial estate put there for that very purpose. One of the sheds is now a church, which has the slogan 'Being a God-Influence'. Opposite, a mural welcomes you to the Shankill Road, if you're going in the opposite direction. 'We are *defiant, proud, welcoming*'. The welcome is a little lessened by the fact that the hither-gesturing hand on the painting is red. Then, past the fence, and you're in the Falls Road. There's one major difference, in that the murals are more right-on, so despite being English, being a Socialist I feel considerably less ill at ease. The Battle of the Boyne is replaced with a protest mural against the occupation of Palestine and a commemoration of the Nakba; Palestinian flags rather than Union Jacks (or more interestingly, the Tricolour) fly from the street. Hunger strikers and Republican taxi services aside, on the Falls murals Frederick Douglass replaces King Billy; Che Guevara appears instead of Cromwell.

Imagery is imagery, but in terms of architecture and planning, the Falls area shows absolutely identical defensible-space urbanism to the Shankill. Tiny semis and terraces around closes, with easily sealed-off entry and exit points, with grim 'public realm'. There are minor differences – the houses are in red brick rather than grey pebble-dash, and mercifully there are two points of architectural punctuation. The twin towers of St Peter's Cathedral, in the gaunt

and spindly Celtic Gothic you can find at St Finbarr's in Cork, rise impressively over the Defensible hutches. Slightly further along the Falls Road, there's a good new leisure centre to keep the kids off the streets, a design by local architects Kennedy Fitzgerald in a brightly coloured but cliché-free modernist manner, looking positively optimistic in the circumstances. And there is a tower block: the Divis Tower, not exactly an imaginative design but recently renovated and decent-looking. Information panels remind you that it originally formed part of a dense, hard to police mid-rise deck-access complex, the Divis Flats, which was demolished and replaced with the houses you see today. The Divis Tower might just have been retained because it had, until recently, a British Army observation post on the roof.

As the most famous sectarian divide in Belfast, the Shankill-Falls model of urbanism could be considered something specific to Belfast, a form that emerged purely because of the need to stop people's houses being burnt down and car bombs from getting into housing estates. The late Martin Pawley listed the innovative features in a 1997 essay on architecture under the influence of terrorism: 'No new housing estate can be easily entered in a vehicle by one route and left by another. Except in a few old residential areas and where street patterns render it impossible, no car park or access road can be found within 12 metres of a residential building.'¹⁹ Similarly, the open plans of streets, hard to police and easy to riot, were made into something controllable and enclosed. And yet it's hard to see this as remotely specific to Belfast (or Derry, or Portadown). In Liverpool in the 1980s a Trotskyist council replaced towers and tenements with a strikingly similar pattern of brick cul-de-sacs separated by perimeter walls; the suggestions of the ur-postmodernist Essex Design Guide in the mid-1970s enshrined the notion of 'Defensible Space' in speculative and public housing. Barratt Homes are planned in a not dissimilar way. And in the UK, rather than submitting plans to the army, we submit them to the police, in the form of Secured by Design, a legal requirement for any new area of social housing. The guidelines are almost exactly the same. What a visit to West Belfast does is make crystal clear the military roots of contemporary urban planning.

Lyrical South Belfast

There are parts of Belfast that weren't completely redesigned into encampments. Much of South Belfast, in the vicinity of the University, is distinctly more normal. After walking back to the centre, you walk in a straight line past, first of all, the Markets, a working-class area which lacks aggressively territorial murals, but which is planned in exactly the same 'defensible' manner as Shankill and Falls. The neo-Victorian architecture here is a little stronger, with nicely patterned brickwork, but the urbanism is identical, and perhaps worse, because the cordon sanitaire is less harsh – you're much closer to the centre, and it meets the grid via a pallid loop of terraces with a grass verge in front. Walk along the main road rather than through the maze of the Markets, and the break is not nearly so sharp. There are some decent industrial buildings, and a convincing, Brutalist-ish mill conversion at Somerset & Co, now Somerset Studios, where harsh concrete and red brick is reconfigured as chic rather than ignored altogether. There's also plenty of very luxurious and blingy-looking restaurants, something which makes it feel even more like Birmingham. Terraces both Regency and Victorian file off from here, and they don't appear to be divided by walls, bunting, murals or conspicuous swathes of wasteland.

Queen's University itself is a red-brick complex comparable to the University of Newcastle or other northern English colleges, a Victorian-Tudor style with some good modernist additions. On the other side is the Infirmary, a clad and tamed '70s futurist tower now dressed in white and gold. The real architectural interest lies further south, at the Botanic Gardens. Here, next to each other, are two buildings that are as original as anything anywhere in the UK or Eire, or elsewhere – two that guarantee Belfast's place in the most recondite of architectural history books. In the gardens itself is a Palm House by Richard Turner, who would later go on to design a much larger and more famous version in Kew, before the credit was swiped by Decimus Burton. This is not quite as freakish and epic, but it shows that the leap into ferro-vitreous dreamland in the 1840s was not entirely a matter of the imperial centre; it means that even modernist architecture,

as much as modernist literature, may unexpectedly have to trace itself to Ireland. It's a bulbous, organic structure, crowded and rusty inside, and very appropriate to the prodigiously grey and rainy climate, a fantastical tropical insect set down in a darkened corner.

Francis Pym's mid-1960s extension to the Ulster Museum is just opposite. The existing Museum, begun in 1929 and left half-finished, was in a similar Edwardian baroque manner to the City Hall; it suggests that inter-war Ulster was as backwards as England with respect to twentieth-century architecture, a pallid, mechanistic and bland form of imperial classicism. Pym's extension is an act of aggression, there's absolutely no doubt about that – the façade is continued in Suprematist forms that owe more to the *Arkhitektons* of Kasimir Malevich than to any then-existing architecture. The coursing of the unfinished building is first continued in the extension, then suddenly broken up with a series of concrete geometries, wrapping around the side, where they form a fragmented, montaged façade; a Corbusian bull-horn profile runs along the bottom, to offer shelter and entrance. The extension keeps to the unfinished building's scale and classical symmetry, while making its protest very apparent. Under the curved concrete entrance is a café in green glass, the result of a recent refurbishment that caused apoplexy in local architects, mortified at the identikit pseudomodernism employed for a building as unique as this. As an urban object, in its parkland setting, it is still extremely powerful.

In the residential streets towards the river, Belfast's quirks mean that what looks like a very normal working-class Victorian area of industrial terraces turns out (when I mention it to anyone who lives in the city) to be the most affluent, middle-class district of the city. For whatever reason, there isn't a trace of sectarian imagery to be found. What you will find, just at the end of one entirely ordinary Victorian street, is O'Donnell and Tuomey's recently completed Lyric Theatre. This is well-made contextual modernism, in the 'other tradition' of modernist humanism that extends from Alvar Aalto to the British Library – the kind of building that makes architecture critics go dewy-eyed, muttering how they don't make them like that any more. There's no doubt

that it approaches its site – a corner at the end of a descending row of terraces, opposite the Lagan – with great intelligence. The architects negotiate the slope, the gradation from the houses to the presence needed in a civic building, and the deep red of the materials with skill, wit and architectonic imagination, providing a series of different and complementary views depending on where the building is seen: the total opposite to the one-liners of Regeneration. For building in a residential and historically coherent area without resorting to the pieties of the vernacular and the ‘reference’, it is a textbook case of how to design well. Hence the applause. I have two caveats, though, one petty, one not. The latter concerns the florescence all the way down the sheer brick façade, an easily avoidable defect that makes it look considerably less old-school in its constructional expertise. The former is the absurdly overpriced café. Regardless – all three of these buildings are worth an architectural pilgrimage in themselves, although the notion that architectural visits could help the city in some way is hard to credit. Especially so on the other side of the river, in East Belfast.

‘It was fine when it left us’

I thought it would be interesting and informative to see if it was possible to walk from the residential working-class areas of East Belfast to the new ‘Titanic Quarter’ adjacent. It is – but I felt lucky to be alive at the end of it. Not because of the sectarianism, alarming as that is, but for more prosaic reasons. At first, the route I took from Laganside across the river was, again, only particularly depressing if you’ve not visited similar schemes in Birmingham, Leeds or elsewhere; normality, again, of a sort. Nobody in the UK would bat an eyelid at the apartment blocks, with their warehouse ‘references’ and warehouse joylessness; nor at the Thames Valley-like retail-park style of a banks’ and outsourcers’ HQ, the Lesley Exchange, with its glass stair towers and ‘stone’ cladding. Only the still very fortified-looking Central Railway Station suggests anything aberrant. The streets are Victorian, though the very wide arterial roads are not. In the distance are a pair of structures that are striking in their gigantism – the monumental cranes

of Harland and Wolff, shipbuilders, who still carry on a small modicum of trade nearby. The cranes have names – Samson and Goliath. Harland and Wolff were, of course, the builders of the Titanic. I grew up in the port from which the Titanic sailed, a city which now has an only slightly smaller population than Belfast, although Belfast's metropolitan ambitions are as clear in Samson and Goliath as in Donegall Square. You'll have seen these cranes already if you've approached Belfast from the north, or from the sea – gaunt Sant'Elia archways that frame views of the city from the Westlink. They were installed in the '70s as a gesture of confidence in the industrial city, Troubles or no Troubles. That their function is presently vestigial is hardly evidence for the uniqueness of Belfast's problems. Tall, held up on alternately thin and bulkily angular supports, with mini-cranes on each side, they embody the sort of industry the Italian futurists fantasized about. They appear on postcards for sale at the airport.

The street signs round here are bilingual, Gaelic and English. The area is Short Strand, a tiny nationalist enclave in loyalist territory. Its urban form is more irregular than in the two rival defensible spaces of Shankill and Falls, as much larger Victorian fragments survive, albeit with the streetline around them completely reconfigured. A long row of terraces is next to a huge cleared site, on which Housing Associations plan to build. Some of these red-brick terraces could easily be in Middlesbrough; others have doorways that look almost Georgian. In amongst them are several closes and cul-de-sacs placed as enclosure, breakers-up of the grid; bungalows and even a bit of quasi-modernist Aaltoesque infill. The murals are, in some cases, pretty mild – Sinn Fein electoral campaigns, people learning Gaelic, kids playing in the Victorian terraces with the cranes in the background. The mural to INLA hunger striker Mickey Devine, surmounted by a red flag dedicated to the small, ultra-violent, far-left Republican organization is as heated as it gets. After that, you pass through the Peace Line. A tiny space lined with walls, that could easily have (and probably at times had) a turnstile, and, once again, the houses are the same and the murals are completely different.

Again, 1980s–90s cul-de-sacs interspersed with small nineteenth-century workers' barracks, again very obvious poverty;

the only unlikeness is in the presence of Union Jack and red-hand bunting, or the content of the gable-end murals. The latter are, here, utterly schizophrenic. There's the Titanic, 'ship of dreams' on one wall; on another, 'NO MORE', and two children shaking hands over a graveyard, with a poem underneath celebrating the end of the violence. Another is being painted as I walk past. It's almost monochrome, showing a funeral procession guarded by two balaclava'd men with machine guns in the foreground. Each of the marching figures wears dark glasses and a face mask. Later, on my way back to the centre, I see more in this stark, monochrome, violent style, presumably by the same artist – commissioned, I'm told, by the local commander for the Ulster Volunteer Force, who is alleged to have been behind a full-scale riot here a few months ago in June 2011, in which shots were fired at police; somewhat overshadowed by the riots across the Irish Sea two months later. I also see a Peace Line more pointedly defensive than any others – it's a rampart, brick blast walls with metal fences above, taller than any of the houses than run alongside it. The houses near the Interface have permanent metal grilles over their windows, as I noticed coming back from the Titanic Quarter.

Northern Ireland, which for pretty obvious reasons has a large public sector, is one of David Cameron's targets for 'shrinking the state'; one of the allegedly babied areas that must be weaned. Those youths who were fighting in Short Strand were largely unemployed, and there will be a lot more of them soon. That's



not to suggest that there has not been private-sector investment; its flagship is that aforementioned Quarter, which takes up a chunk of the Harland and Wolff site. To get there from residential East Belfast, you have to traverse a swathe of motorway without any pedestrian crossings, and here is where walking feels a little like taking your life in your hands. Someone has obviously walked it before you, though, as there's a small piece of graffiti on the concrete of the bridge, in small handwriting so you have to look closely: 'Only the English understand cruelty. Cunt.' There is literally no other way to the place on foot; the route from here to there is about as friendly to the walker as the route from Bluewater to Ebbsfleet International. This is apt enough, as the planner and architect for the Quarter is Bluewater's creator-of-community, Eric Kuhne.

The neighbour here is not a disused quarry or a container port but a residential, working-class area, and one that might well be in some straits. It would have been nice to try and make some attempt to connect the Quarter to East Belfast. Enterprise Zones are not made of such things, and in fairness Belfast City Council would have had to demolish part of the motorway to do so. It is instead, in an act of pure folly, being extended. When you finally reach it, the roads and the mild-modernist offices and hotels that loop around them are planned as an arc, which must have made a pretty pattern on the drawing board. The 'public' part entails an architecturally inoffensive college and the Odyssey Arena, a gross, lumbering, introverted troll of a building. It gets really exciting, though, when you make it to the point where the Titanic Quarter meets the remains of the shipyards. A shattered ticket booth for a car park, an acre or so of rubble, the cranes in sublime proximity across the sheds, and a sandstone office block very like the one in Barrow. Behind it, waving its arms in the air so you notice it, is the Titanic Visitor Centre, which is the Icon; it takes the sharp, exploded forms and metallic surfaces of an old Danny Libeskind building, the sort that was supposed to symbolize conflict and disjunction, and gives it beaux-arts symmetry, which may not have been the original idea. The symbolism here is not at all ambiguous. It's an iceberg. Do you see? The official slogan for this apocalypse, found on the advertisements, is:

‘The Titanic Quarter. We used to make ships here – now we make communities.’

The Demarcation Breaks Up

It would be hugely unfair to give the impression that all of this is going unchallenged. In fact, there’s a degree of ideas and resistance here which the cities that Belfast resembles would be lucky to have. For instance, the Forum for Alternative Belfast have published a plan for building on the surface car parks and wastes around the ring road, in order not merely to eliminate the suburban slurry that surrounds the grid, but to establish some tangible coherence to the city, to give the rest of it the easy link between centre and residential area that only South Belfast has at present. It’s the sort of idea that has hardly helped make Manchester a more equal city, and it may be easily criticized as Richard Rogers-issue sermonizing on the virtues of dense and compact cities; but Belfast obviously needs this sort of intervention more than most places. A simple visual and spatial link between West Belfast and the centre wouldn’t solve its problems, but would surely make a positive difference; even more a real link between the Titanic Quarter and Short Strand. Architect Mark Hackett of the Forum drove me around North Belfast at the end of my visit. It was the only part of the journey conducted by car, and that became something I was very pleased about. Here, past Crumlin Road and leading on to Ardoyne, the relatively simple demarcation of Shankill and Falls is replaced by an illegible chaos of peace lines, both new and long-lasting. So, it’s hard to tell the difference between outer Birmingham and outer Walsall – well, here that difficulty has been militarized.

Belfast was not part of Pathfinder, the New Labour scheme to demolish working-class housing and replace it with something more aspirational; but in North Belfast you could be forgiven for thinking it had. Once more, the Northern Irish capital appears to be doing much the same thing with its cities as England, only for what are on the face of it different reasons. Here, sometimes nondescript and sometimes handsome Victorian housing is left derelict and then demolished when tensions along an Interface



Zone start to run too high; in the process, large swathes of the northern suburbs look like they've just faced a random V-2 attack. Next to one of these dereliction interfaces is a park, with a Berlin Wall through it to stop the youth from starting riots. Nearby, adjoining a relatively decent housing development, where there are at least vague hints of streets rather than cul-de-sacs and a convincing re-use of local red brick, is Belfast's only privately-funded peace line. It was a condition of the development, because it was assumed that demographic changes meant that members of one of the 'communities' would be more likely to be living in the new development than members of the other, who had hitherto lived in that area. So their semi-detached houses have running behind them a white-painted concrete wall. In another of the battered interface areas a spit of scrubland has some shipping containers on it, on which Sina's convenience store sells its wares. It's a long way from East London's outposts of Container Chic like Boxpark or Trinity Buoy Wharf. The shop serves both groups, with seats outside and a café inside. It seems to work. In their wisdom, Belfast council have refused to grant the container and its owner permission to use the site. It seems an unlikely place for a 'stunning development', but hope springs eternal.

Sometimes all this has positive architectural outcomes. Castellated linen mills tower over an '80s council house noddily-land; industrial estates crop up at random points, making the perimeter walls look less obvious. At the entrance back into the city centre, past the derelict Crumlin Road courthouse, slated to become flats but derelict for years (Barry Gilligan has to answer for this, too), past a heavy Victorian jail (the one which internment filled so full that the H-Blocks were built), past an Orange Hall which, apparently, recently removed its protective metal screen (reasons to be cheerful!), you find two magnificently aggressive, exuberant and soaring Victorian churches facing off against each other, the sectarian animus proving a great spur to wilfully tasteless architectural imagination. It is however a macabre pleasure, and so is Belfast urbanism in general. Here is a city riven with divisions, whose post-Troubles redevelopment has somehow *multiplied* walls both real and perceived. It's incredibly disturbing, I repeat, not for its difference from the rest of the UK, but its similarity. All the factors – rampant inequality, deindustrialization, social divisions and poverty – are as familiar as the city centre's buildings. Sectarianism might be mere torchpaper, or a particularly violent distraction from the obvious. With unemployment about to explode, what will happen here in the next few years? When Belfast is weaned off the state, will the young men of East Belfast all get jobs in the Titanic Quarter's Premier Inn, or will they not? These questions notwithstanding, for the rest of the country, contemporary Belfast could so easily be a vision of the future. Peace lines in Clapham are not implausible.

Forum aside, there is one major cause for optimism in Belfast's built environment. The area around Victoria Square may be booming of a Saturday afternoon, but the northern peripheries of the city centre get squalid quick; at one intersection, you have a street leading off towards the Shankill that is mostly boarded up, which in the case of the shop selling weaponry may have been a good thing. A lot of former commercial buildings here are derelict, either because they're being sat upon by developers waiting for the recovery, or in many cases because the sites are owned by NAMA, the 'bad bank' that handles the Republic of Ireland's assets. They may all of course end up as loft living solutions,



but given the unlikeliness of that recovery, a major question is begged. And a particularly urgent answer is given in the Bank of Ireland building. This is in an area that could perhaps have been marketed as Belfast's Deco Quarter, should that have had a sufficiently historic resonance. Ornate inter-war moderne buildings with strongly expressed corner façades face each other; the best of them is this Portland stone bank, its Mini-Manhattan clock tower now with a banner across it reading 'OCCUPY BELFAST'. The wings to the street feature the slogan 'IT'S NOT A RECESSION, IT'S A ROBBERY'. On my second visit, in January 2012, the occupiers had just turned up here, moving in from their campsite in front of Ulster University; it seemed a much smarter choice, and not just for the shelter. They were still debating what to do with the space – inside, their sleeping bags were within the tents. A homeless shelter, a social centre, a space in the heart of the city where they could hurl their defiance at it. One of the occupiers tells me: 'Oh, we know about all the disused buildings in Belfast. We're going to take them, one by one.'



Chapter Eighteen

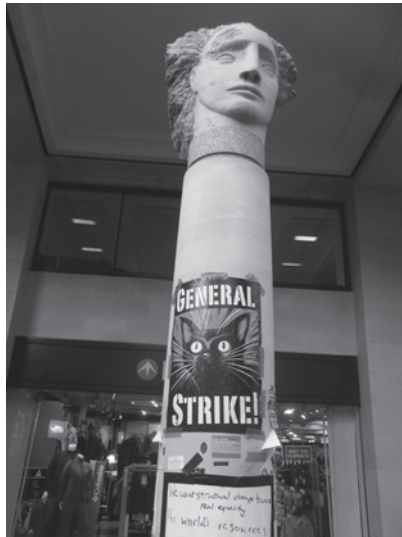
The City of London: The Beginning is Nigh

Occupy versus New Urbanism

If you looked up above St Paul's Cathedral in the early afternoon of 9 November 2011, you could have counted at least three helicopters. Their deafening spiralling nearly drowned out what was happening below. There was a student protest, marching nearby in Moorgate, massively over-policed as revenge for past slips; it intended, though failed, to link up with an ongoing occupation outside St Paul's. All this made the 9th a perfect day to explore this neurotically protected citadel of undead financial capitalism. The City of London is the smallest and oldest place that is covered in this book: the Roman colonial city that became the English capital that became an eerily depopulated autonomous centre of gentlemanly finance. Once the incarnation in space of the British Empire's funding system, since 1986 it has taken on another life. Still not residential, still unencumbered by representative democracy or common law, the City has become the fulcrum of a system of offshore, unregulated finance, sprouting colonies on the Isle of Dogs, Borough, Holborn (which it has recently rebranded as 'Midtown'), Aldgate and Farringdon (if not Birmingham, Leeds and Edinburgh). It is Old Corruption in braced glass, the satanic site at the heart of the UK's malaise. Where shall we begin the indictment? Suburbanization, the evacuation of the city and the creation of single-class enclaves practically began here in the eighteenth century, when the coffee houses were replaced by Clubs and their habitués escaped westwards. Here, chaps made

themselves fabulously rich on the proceeds of slavery and rapine. Here, in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, a form of capitalism fit for gentlemen, seemingly detached from the muck of industry, became so successful that it considered itself fit to dictate to the rest of the country. Here, our livelihoods are frittered away as part of a cocaine-fuelled casino; here, you are paid a bonus for creating a double-dip recession. Here, government policy is dictated. It sounds like demagoguery, but then the City's activities have long been so rapacious as to be almost parodic, a bad Soviet satirist's impression of capitalism. A serious reckoning is well overdue.

The occupiers had aimed to take the London Stock Exchange, but in the process they had settled on a prime architectural embodiment of their target. Encircling St Paul's, where the Church of England was morally embarrassed into giving the occupiers succour, is Paternoster Square. This was once the City's printers' quarter; here in 1940, when the bombs rained down on St Paul's, the hoses were pointed towards the Cathedral rather than its hinterland, leading to the near-total destruction of a piece of working urban fabric. The redevelopment as towers, low-rise offices and a public square so scandalized the Prince of Wales that his architectural tastes were fully catered for in the 1990s redevelopment,



masterplanned by William Whitfield. It's a simulacrum of what was there before, full of signifiers of 'London' but without much correspondence to anything that previously existed here. The main face to the street was Juxon House, a nasty, tacky Vegas via Mussolini's Italy via Duchy of Cornwall neoclassical superblock. In the last decade, the City has been at the forefront of the new pseudomodernism, so this development has always stuck out for its kitsch revanchism. It almost seems deliberate – the City letting the future king settle a score, so that it could scandalize him with each further development. Entering the 'public', privately owned and privately patrolled Paternoster Square, you walk under the gate of the early-eighteenth-century Temple Bar, attributed to Wren. It was dismantled by the Victorians and sold off for someone's garden in Enfield. And here it is again: a long way from the Temple, but fitting entirely with the paraphernalia all around, such as the ludicrous approximation of the Monument that towers at the heart of the square.

There was the ghost of a town planning idea in this collection of ostentatiously contextual banks and offices, in the way they enclosed the great dome with a series of narrow byways, attempting to replicate the City's medieval street plan. This has long been one of twenty-first-century London's most depressing, smugly jolly spaces. Not now, though. The silly mock-pathetic columns of Juxon House, each of them topped by a broken, blank-eyed Grecian head, were covered by the occupiers, making them an *architecture parlante* – hundreds of small posters, flyers, messages, notes, manifestos, declarations. 'GENERAL STRIKE!' reads the aptest, with a wild-eyed cat below. 'THE BEGINNING IS NIGH!' reads one, 'BEAUTY IS IN THE STREET' another, which is quite Urban Renaissance of them, though the poster's image of a barricade-laden thoroughfare is not very Urban Splash – and nor is the highly developed public infrastructure of the camp the graphic collage accompanies. In tents large and small are a University, Welfare centre, Clinic, Restaurant, Public Toilets (the latter especially unusual in contemporary London). The tents themselves are a Drop City of simple, curvilinear frames covered with multicoloured tensile artificial fabric – high-tech, though their users might not always think so. A line of armoured

riot police, shields and truncheons at the ready, stand at the other side of Temple Bar, with the pastiche of the Monument in the background. As an example of *détournement*, a subverting of private space into public space, you really couldn't do better; it's a wonderful irony that the Yard's part-ownership by the Church has meant that the encampment is outside Paternoster Square, of all places (though there are subsidiary occupations at the time of writing – a 'Bank of Ideas' in a disused bank in Broadgate, and another tent encampment in the genuinely public, municipally-owned Finsbury Square). And, for months, they stayed here, a semi-permanent experiment in propaganda and direct democracy. It was the most exciting thing to happen to the City of London since the Lloyd's Building. Or the fire.

Enjoy Your Spectacle!

I have differences with the occupiers, and they are outlined to some degree at the end of this chapter. But what they have hit upon here, under the influence of Climate Camp, Occupy Wall Street and the student movement of 2010–11, is extremely smart: the move away from the notion of protest as a brief 'carnival' accompanying a ruling-class summit, or a march from A to B, and the attempt instead to become *un*-spectacular, to become a feature of the urban landscape. The experience of the protests outside of the Bank of England during the G20 meetings, in April 2009, an event billed as the 'G20 Meltdown', is relevant here. Due to a combination of cowardice, claustrophobia and Crohn's disease, I do not react well to being 'kettled' at marches – that increasingly popular police tactic which involves penning in a group of protesters, waiting until they get pissed off enough at being penned in that tempers fray and stuff starts getting thrown, then piling in with the shields, pepper spray and truncheons. I tend to moan, and/or panic. So the plan that day, at least as far as I was concerned, was to get as close to the protest as possible without getting kettled. In this I failed entirely, and was not allowed to leave for three hours. After several attempts to get through the police lines with my new shiny NUJ Press Pass (helpful police comments: 'Try the end of the police line', 'Dunno, I'm just

calling my boss', 'Go up Bartholomew Lane', 'Try Lombard St', and best of all 'Try over there, but it depends who you ask'), I eventually made it – the friends I had abandoned emerged about fifteen minutes later, thanks to the reported 'breaking of a police line'. Those who didn't escape then were held until midnight. So, I'm not all that well disposed to the tactic where you reclaim the street by letting the police imprison you in it; but there's something at these marches you don't see at the more well-organized, well-stewarded ones, such as the decidedly plodding demonstration that preceded the G20 protests by a few days. The chants are more darkly funny, the costumes are better, there are fewer 'carnavalesque' samba bands, and placards such as 'Harm Bono' and 'You try for ages to destroy capitalism, and then it destroys itself' were a cut above the standard issue.

Nonetheless, the G20 protests, and the many 'carnivals against capitalism' that preceded them, were purely spectacularized affairs, something acknowledged by the protesters themselves ('Enjoy Your Spectacle!', read one graffito on the Royal Exchange), by the media (even before the RBS windows got smashed, professional photographers made up a goodly portion of us in the kettle) and by the police, who in a sense gave a proportion of the crowd exactly what they wanted. It showed the final uselessness as a concept and protesting tactic of the 'Temporary Autonomous Zone'. But before we bury it, we should acknowledge exactly why this was initially so persuasive a tactic, in both political and geographical terms. The City of London is a place ringed by steel even on the most mundane rainy Tuesday, and when filled with protesters, it presents a spectacle of the latent becoming suddenly blindingly obvious, as the quiet surveillance and police presence becomes thumpingly loud and brutal – something made especially apparent, when those unkettled had to give their names and submit to being photographed.

A protest in the City also creates curious juxtapositions of authoritarian architecture and the actual forces of authority. You could see a line of police in front of the Bank of England, Herbert Baker's horribly crass, clumsy 1930s edifice; a building parasitic upon John Soane's original (and, as an eighteenth-century anti-riot gesture, windowless) ground floor, a classicism

that imitates the past while actively destroying it. The plod were lined up in front of the reduced-classical sculptures on the building's frontage, redolent of Hitler's favoured sculptor Arno Breker. Conversely, the Climate Camp protesting nearby in Bishopsgate were setting up something genuinely adaptable and indeterminate in the shadow of the Lloyd's building. There is an urbanist lesson in there also. The City should, in theory, have been an enormously difficult place to kettle, given the complexity of that medieval street plan, the diametric opposite of those Haussmannian anti-barricade boulevards. In response, every alley, passage, cross-street and underpass was blocked by lines of police. After being unkettled, I walked around streets of offices where you could see, readied, vehicles more usually employed in 1970s Northern Ireland, or groups of riot police psyching themselves up like American footballers. The security landscape became blindingly, barbarically obvious. This should in theory have contrasted with the area within the protest itself, with its own transformation of space, but whether this was noticed by the office workers of this already deeply enclosed and protected area of London is a decidedly moot point. So who was this demonstration *for*?

The zone created was certainly temporary, but in no sense whatever was it autonomous, as the entire area was sealed off with remarkably little difficulty, and the potential – which, by being broadcast to those outside of the 5,000 inside the kettle, was necessarily a spectacle – of a reclaimed space, an area of work and capital turned over to the ludic, was easily replaced with a spectacle of boredom, violence and aimless inertia. Worst of all, a spectacle of ritual. A tactic of this sort could only work on a far wider scale, where a large area – which could become part of everyday life, not be contained within a fixed boundary – were reclaimed. That would be a question of numbers as much as of tactics. The Climate Camp had a linked, but dissimilar problem. Obviously determined *not* to give the *Evening Standard* what it wanted, they reacted to the riot police's attempt to sweep them off Bishopsgate by putting their hands in the air and chanting 'This is not a riot' – only to face almost exactly the same treatment. Except that their (televised) spectacle became in the process

far more effective. It's no surprise, then, that the Occupy movement, or UK Uncut, have effectively picked up the slack after the farcical end to the 'G20 Meltdown'.

Groundscrapers and Stealth Buildings

Given that some of the experience I've described is garnered from protesting in rather than walking through the City, the malevolence of the place is taken as given in this chapter. It is also, which should be somewhat shaming, perhaps the most coherently planned UK city of the last twenty years. This is something of a negative virtue. Compared with the planning of the inner areas of Birmingham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Bristol, the tenure of City Planning Officer Peter Rees since 1985 can be seen as a relatively benevolent despotism; the nearest UK equivalent to the expensive stone-clad faux-austerity of, say, contemporary Berlin, although much more picturesque and irregular. You can see it at its most impressive at night, on a train passing into Cannon Street, where a riverside crammed with decorous glazed ziggurats with skyscrapers and St Paul's behind them provides one of the twenty-first-century British city's few analogues to the



cities of the future we'd all grown up on in science fiction. On the ground, in the daytime, new City buildings boast expensive materials, fine detailing, and sometimes a degree of cleverness in their adaptation to the old City's streets, courtyards and alleyways, to which they are mostly forced, to some degree, to conform. Sometimes the resultant urban picturesque is purely accidental, as when skyscrapers poke out from the edges of a curved passage; elsewhere, it has become a virtue. The architects are seldom the grunts, the commercial architects who churn out much of what actually gets built in Urban Britain – Broadway Malyan, Benoy, Hamiltons, Chapman Taylor, Capita, BDP, Aedas – but talented if often bloodless starchitects like Eric Parry, Richard Rogers, Jean Nouvel, or blue-chip multinationals such as Skidmore Owings Merrill or Kohn Pedersen Fox. It's not a recipe for joy, flights of fancy or imagination, but it shows a degree of architectural decency that contrasts amusingly with the nihilism which pays for them.

There's roughly one success to one howler, all built around the same time; the most interesting schemes, if we suspend non-architectural judgement, are those which pay most attention to the unique montage of the City's built fabric. The area around Wood Street has particularly good going. Richard Rogers' twin towers are perhaps his finest post-Lloyd's works in the capital, an asymmetrical glazed Gothic; nearby is a mid-rise office block by Eric Parry that is elegantly and expensively authoritarian, evidently inspired by the Mussolini style of McMorran & Whitby's Wood Street Police Station, a very late (post-war) classical tower with podium. 'Radical' architecture is represented by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture's new building for Rothschilds. This is exaggeratedly site-specific; it is crammed into a tiny spot next to Wren's St Stephen Walbrook, a building which is itself a compendium of all the different architectural devices that can be crammed into a very small space. Close up, Rothschild's is clumsy and irritating, with its irregular steel mullions in vague reference to the World Trade Centre; from the other side of the river its fiddliness suddenly makes sense, as you see how it rises into a glazed boardroom on stilts, a surreal image of contemporary plutocracy.

There are dozens, also, of new office blocks that you can't tell are new office blocks – façade jobs, where drab but 'historic' bankers' classical is riveted onto steel-framed, open-plan offices. Then there are the 'groundscrapers', the long, low office blocks which couldn't go higher because they'd interfere with the views of St Paul's. The best of these are those which embrace the basically sinister, shadowy, unregulated nature of the City's activities – the black glass and spiky steel mullions of KPF's extension to the old *Daily Express* building, or, nearby, Peter Foggo's Gotham construction in blue stone. It stands adjacent to James Stirling's Number One Poultry, which in that context is like a Brooks Bros suit accessorized with comedy neckwear from Tie Rack, a screamingly City-Boy building, aggressive and bumptious, an overbearing pub bore. There are currently attempts afoot to rehabilitate buildings like this from their former critical obloquy, and while it's possible to admire Stirling's spatial mastery and density of architectural expression, it's also impossible to contemplate such noxious jollity without feeling slightly ill. Mies van der Rohe designed a tower for this site. After a protracted fight between conservationists and developers, Number One Poultry is what occurred. It's certainly more apt. The other 'groundscrapers' don't even have the overbearing wit of Poultry – typical is Foster's Walbrook Building, a crouching armadillo in banded steel. A more unusual effort is the attempt to bring non-banking activities into the City at Jean Nouvel's One New Change, a confused, desolate and cold space. All this said, even the bad buildings here have a sensitivity of massing and materials that is deeply unusual in Britain. The Devil doesn't necessarily have the best buildings, but he can afford slightly more civilized ones. Don't think too hard about what goes on inside and there's often something to grudgingly admire. There's another kind of City building, though; one which practically forces you to have an opinion on it.

Skyscrapers for Bus Stops

The suggestion here that City planning takes its context seriously might sound counter-intuitive, given its obvious vertical

emphasis of late. The architectural results show American corporate modernism made more interesting by being slotted at random into the street's non-plan, creating strongly memorable accidental vistas. The Gherkin still feels like a piece of CGI up close, and SOM's Broadgate Tower is squat where it should be soaring, but KPF's Heron Tower is more impressive – sleek from the south side, its heavy-engineering backside is presented to hip, faux-industrial Shoreditch. The Heron is, at the time of writing, largely empty. All are the ultimate result of Ken Livingstone's failed Faustian Pact in the early 2000s – skyscrapers for Section 106 agreements, and a manifestly misguided attempt by a Greater London Authority without tax-raising powers to finance infrastructural improvements and new social housing, resulting in a few 'affordable' studio flats slotted behind waterside yuppie-dromes. Seen from, say, the viewing area of Tate Modern, the new City skyscrapers compare well with Canary Wharf's axial beaux-arts boredom, appearing genuinely distinctive and peculiar, a montage skyline. Those towers that have been built, and even some of those unbuilt, are now 'iconic' – taken, apparently, to Londoners' hearts in a way that is rare for London's tall buildings. This is a very surprising development. Centre Point most famously, but also the NatWest Tower and the '70s cluster around it, were for decades ciphers for architectural boredom and malevolence. In that, they're not untypical; La Défense or Frankfurt are held in similarly low esteem.

In *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri claimed that 'no better way exists of grasping what the American skyscraper is *not* than by studying how European culture has attempted to assimilate and translate it into its own terms.' For him, the problem here was a fundamental point-missing; Europeans were convinced, erroneously, that the skyscraper was 'architecture'. On the contrary, wrote Tafuri, they were 'real live bombs with chain effects, designed to explode the entire real estate market'. They were an exemplar of capitalism at its limits, 'an instrument – and no longer an "expression" – of economic policy'. From the 1870s to the 1940s, the steel frames of these speculative megaliths were clad after construction in historicist ornament, but that too was driven by economic motives

– designed purely to reassure, to give an impression of solidity. The freakish, irrational shapes of American capitalism was translated across the Atlantic into ‘high architecture’, and in the process the original delirium was lost; an explanation, perhaps, for the libidinal deficiencies of Birmingham or Croydon’s central ‘mini-Manhattans’.

London’s experience with tall buildings is more riven with controversies and high-profile failures than anywhere else. Yet the City is now starting to complete one of the most dramatic and gestural new skylines anywhere in the world, topped, inescapably, just outside of its borders, by Renzo Piano’s ‘Shard’. How did this happen? In Britain’s brief burst of post-war social democracy, tall buildings were not skyscrapers but high-rises, serving useful purposes – they were housing, largely, freeing up green space in the new council estates. Because of this, the better tall buildings are nearly all residential, educational or in some way connected with the Welfare State; it wasn’t until the late 1960s that the capital’s financial district even began to build what would once have been called skyscrapers. This was partly the result of the old City’s refusal to accommodate modernism, its suspicion, pre-Big Bang, of anything outside of its own traditions. By the early ’60s its new buildings and bombsite replacements were still generally neoclassical or otherwise non-modernist. The results were mainly dead, Portland stone edifices that Plymouth would have rejected as too stodgy; though there are some wilfully odd exceptions, such as the aforementioned Wood Street Police Station or Bracken House, Albert Richardson’s sandstone, Chicago School edifice opposite St Paul’s: an office block for the *Financial Times*, its ornamented doorway features a depiction of Winston Churchill as a Sun God, which says a great deal about the aesthetics of the post-war City. So when it did ‘go modernist’ at the end of that decade, it did so reluctantly.

Aside from a few minor essays in Mies van der Rohe imitation by the firm Gollins Melvin Ward, the most visible of these early skyscrapers were the dozen or so designed by the corporate architect Colonel Richard Seifert, in a style initially indebted to the sleek, chic Milan work of Gio Ponti, or the sensual, patterned modernism of Oscar Niemeyer – the demolished London

Bridge Tower exemplified the former, Centre Point in the West End the latter. Subsequently Seifert developed a more original, sombre, sinister, paranoid manner exemplified by the inscrutable NatWest Tower, until the early 2000s the City's tallest building. Interestingly, Seifert has been all but forgotten. There is no monograph on his work, at least three of his London towers have been demolished, and only one, Centre Point, is listed. Yet their dominance of the skyline continues, rivalled only by Christopher Wren, and more recently, Norman Foster. And then came the new generation known as 'Ken's Towers', and a neophyte embrace of glass and steel by stock-brick and concrete London.

Skyscrapers' close link with capitalist crisis is legendary. The famous 'skyscraper index' entails plotting financial crashes (1929, 1974, 1997, 2008) against the completion of successive 'world's tallest' towers (Empire State Building, World Trade Centre, Petronas Towers, Burj Khalifa). London, again, conforms to type – Centre Point was most famous for lying empty and unlet, in a city with endemic homelessness; in the 1970s, London's 'Architects' Revolutionary Council' proclaimed that 'we wish to create a situation whereby every time a student passes a building such as Centre Point he vows that he will never work in a practice that is involved in such obscenities'. When the derivatives and property-based boom of the Blair era led to a massive demand for office space, the City and its Docklands outpost were forced once again to build upwards – yet the example of the 1960s had unpleasant associations. One Canada Square indicated this could be done, though it had never been particularly popular. Then Ken Livingstone, elected as a left-wing protest candidate but very quickly ingratiating himself with the City of London, became convinced of the need for a new skyline – partly due to the aforementioned Faustian Pact, and partly, it seems, after being dazzled by a visit to Shanghai. And so the appropriate planning restrictions were lifted.

A tower designed by Norman Foster showed the way forward. Officially, Foster's skyscraper on the site of the IRA-bombed Baltic Exchange was first called the 'Swiss Re tower' after its sponsors, and after they sold it, '30 St Mary Axe', after its address; but it will always be 'the Gherkin' to most. Calculated or



not, the nicknaming was a masterstroke – the Cockney homeliness and domesticity of the name suggested that the alien object had earned some kind of public affection. This was something no previous London tower had achieved; and its unironically phallic nature may have helped (it features as a psychoanalyst's office in the hilarious London-based *Basic Instinct 2*). After the Gherkin, a whole raft of towers was announced, almost simultaneously, and all of them were given cutesy domestic nicknames. The Walkie-Talkie. The Cheesegrater. The Helter-Skelter. Tallest of all is the Shard, outside of the City's jurisdiction but very much part of this story. The Shard is the only one of these towers to have preemptively used a possible nickname as its actual, 'official' name, and a board with 'SHARD' emblazoned upon it has been London's tallest object for some months at the time of writing.

Intended to be the tallest building in Europe, it was soon overtaken by Moscow's City of Capitals, but its striking disjunction with its surroundings indicates something rather unprecedented. This is London's first 'supertall' skyscraper, putting it in the exalted company of the Sears Tower, the Shanghai World Financial Centre, the Petronas Towers, and Dubai's notorious Burj; and it really is one of Tafuri's 'real live bombs'. Its base is so enormous that two earlier high-rises, one by Seifert, were

demolished to make way for it. From a distance, as intended, it is one sheer work, delicate and coherent; on the ground, it's a mess, with mini-towers the size of a tall council block bolted onto it at the corners, as if it wasn't bulky enough. The effect on Borough, the area into which it has crashed, is truly disastrous. The terraces and tenements around are not so much dwarfed as bullied into silence, subject to an act of urban thuggery. Meanwhile, around London Bridge station an extraordinary network of ad hoc walkways leads the pedestrian on a jagged route to traverse the site. On the south bank of the Thames, the Shard has no 'cluster' as company, or to soften the blow. It is deforming to the urban fabric, explosive in its context, and yet, in its unfinished form, thrilling to behold.

The somewhat sickening thrill has been in watching the Shard go up, watching a tiny skeleton staff of builders erect this gigantic glass edifice, with its bowels still on display; watching it imprint upon the London skyline the rude stub of its concrete lift core, watching the bare steel frame stack up as glass panels chase close behind. Just as in the Gothic skyscrapers of 1900s Chicago, in the completed work all of this is effaced in order to create an entirely seamless effect, a pure and ethereal 'shard of glass' without any trace of human hands – but certainly intended to evoke the pen of its architect, Renzo Piano. Anyone keen that architects observe some kind of urban order, some sense of scale, some dignity or rectitude in the London townscape, would be mortified by the sheer aggression and arrogance of the Shard. It would be advisable for them to journey west to the City's borders – the area of Holborn recently rebranded as 'Midtown' – to Central St Giles, next to Centre Point, where another tower by Renzo Piano was planned. After heritage objections finished that off, this expensive mixed-use scheme had suddenly to shrink down, while still maintaining the requisite level of profit on the investment. The result is an atrocious botch-job, a bunch of extremely dense, stocky and inelegant blocks crammed into the site, with a grim postage stamp of public space in the middle; in order to distract attention from this act of violence, Piano decided to colour the entire thing in lurid yellows, oranges and greens. It's an embarrassing building, with none of the confidence and clarity of the Shard – and if there

is an alternative, serving the same functions, then the Shard is what it looks like. If one accepts the system that produces these buildings, one has also to accept that they will be tall, very tall.

The Shard is, more than absolutely anything else in the UK, a definitive glass gravestone for the 1990s and 2000s' tentative, half-hearted attempts at urban and architectural reform under the direction of Piano's former partner, Richard Rogers. The Urban Task Force that he led, and the planning advice he gave to Ken Livingstone, entailed making neoliberalism *look* nicer. There would be speculative blocks of flats, but a Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment would assess them, and sometimes give their developers a stern telling-off. There would be giant office blocks, but they would be designed by first-rank, blue-chip international architects like Rafael Vinoly or Renzo Piano (when the Shard was first mooted under John Major, the architects were to be local hacks Broadway Malyan). The results are only now coming to completion under an anti-urban, Conservative government and Mayoralty, and it's hard, looking at the chaos around the Shard, or the extreme inequalities it incarnates, to imagine this was what Rogers or Livingstone originally had in mind. Next to the Shard is another high-rise, once the tallest in London south of the Thames, now a mere pipsqueak – the Brutalist 1970s tower of Guy's Hospital, an especially extraordinary survival given that inner-urban hospitals have been pressured to sell their lucrative land and move to peripheral locations, as part of the Private Finance Initiative. It will soon be reclad, to be 'in keeping' with the Shard.

The Shard, largely owned by the property investment fund Qatari Diar, is intended to house high-end offices, luxury flats, a hotel and a spa. The notion that London could erect a block of council housing or an NHS hospital as one of the pivotal objects on its skyline is now unthinkable. And for that, the lame conformism of a generation that wanted to make neoliberal capitalism more rational and more elegant is chiefly responsible.

The Dining Room in the Oil Rig

It is, today, hard to ponder the architectural qualities or otherwise of the City; it's a *recherché* of perverse pleasure, like admiring the design of prisons. There's plenty of interest, but it's not the sort of thing you'd admit to in company. Especially when you consider the fact that the public purse is now effectively what funds the City's new generation of financial phalli, while the bankers therein squeal against a Tobin tax. That there are worthwhile buildings coming out of this seems beside the point. But even then, nothing has animated the City's malevolence with the demented extravagance of Lloyd's, a building which seemed to scare Rogers and his clients into twenty-five years of worthy sentimentousness.

If there's a building which encapsulates in one structure what happened in Britain in the 1980s, and what afflicts it still, then it's Lloyd's of London. Designed by Richard Rogers in 1979, and completed to coincide with the City's 'Big Bang' in 1986, it is usually interpreted in one of two completely inadequate ways. For architectural history, it's a monument to 'High-Tech', a style which arose in the mid-70s as a sort of last flicker from the white heat of the technological revolution, at the hands of currently ennobled, often American-trained architects – Baron



Foster of Thames Bank, Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, Sir Michael Hopkins, Baron Rogers of Riverside. High-tech, or a version of it, has been the dominant form of architecture in the UK for the last two decades, though you can glean a lot from the change in its functions – in the '70s most of the above were designing factories, now, with rare and telling exceptions, they design office blocks, cultural centres and luxury flats with a still residual 'industrial aesthetic'. The other thing the Lloyd's Building is known as is a huge metallic embodiment of the Big Bang, a Thatcherite machine for underwriting in (it features on a Five Star record sleeve, and a shop in the basement still sells Athena-style reproductions of it in moody monochrome). But neither of these two takes gives the slightest indication of how monstrous, compelling and utterly fucked-up Lloyd's is; the architectural critics can't talk about much more than the detailing, the anti-capitalists can't look beyond its (admittedly unpleasant) function. In order to really capture its weirdness you have to go inside. A visit on Open House weekend in September 2011 seemed a good occasion.

One of the many things Lloyd's is about is a strategy of tension between the two complementary factions of the British ruling class. Before Rogers, the insurers were housed in a neoclassical edifice built as late as the 1950s, contemporary with the Seagram Building – an embodiment of a practically unchanging British gentlemanly capitalism, resistant both to modernism and to swanky, brash American finance capitalism. On one level, Lloyd's is 'Wienerization' to the nth degree. It houses one of the oldest institutions of the City of London, an insurance firm dating back to 1688 (neatly contemporary with the 'Glorious Revolution'), and it houses it in the most astonishing futurist structure ever erected in the UK. If it evokes any previously existing buildings of any kind, then they're almost always industrial, or specifically petroleum-linked – oil refineries, or the North Sea Oil Rigs which proliferated off the east coast of Scotland in the 1970s, much beloved of high-tech architects. Both of these are visually striking typologies because of their sheer utility, because their functional parts are in no way sheathed or hidden, and because the refining process requires the baffling, twisting intricacies of pipes and gantries. Like so many things with Lloyd's, you can just tick

off the political-economic resonances – the oil boom that kept Thatcherism secure in its confrontations with the unions providing inadvertent inspiration for the aesthetic of the City itself at the exact point it was let off the leash.

Maybe this was some kind of unacknowledged appeasement of the gods of industry, paying tribute to it at the same time it was being destroyed. It's also possible that Lloyd's was and is especially thrilling for people who have never worked in a factory, the only other kind of place where services, pipes and ducts are habitually left so bare, since 'nobody' is looking. Maybe. If there is a specific non-industrial built precedent, though, it's Rogers' earlier Pompidou Centre, the first of a very long and still unbroken line of non-specific cultural centres and tourist draws with wilfully spectacular architecture erected across Western cities. The 'Beaubourg' is often considered to be a '60s dream come true: Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price's adaptable, anti-architectural 'Fun Palace', completed and then named after an anti-*soixante-huitard* Gaullist. The '68ers immediately moved to disavow it, of course – the fantasy fiction *The So-Called Utopia of the Centre Beaubourg* was the gauche's 'don't give me what I want' response – but if it looks like a Fun Palace, quacks like a Fun Palace, etc. ... You can see where I'm going with this. An industrial aesthetic is used for Fun and then is used for Capital. The finance-entertainment complex.

What makes visiting Lloyd's such a bizarre experience, however, is seeing how the underwriters have conserved so many elements of their atavistic previous existence. These remnants are scattered around the new building, decontextualized fragments ripped from 1763, 1799, 1925 and 1958, rudely riveted onto the ducts and pipes. There's the antiquated uniforms worn by the service staff; the front façade of the 1920s offices is held up like a trophy on street level; inside, the Lutine Bell sits at the foot of 'The Room', more of which later; several paintings and bits of furnishings survive from previous buildings; and strangest of all, a complete eighteenth-century dining room by Robert Adam was preserved and recreated. At first, it seems like these are tokens kept on a sort of reservation of gentlemanly capitalism in order to placate the old guard. After a while you realize that what is

really happening here is more like a marriage, a reconciliation, a refutation of Martin Wiener's notion of a difference or hostility between the capitalism of gentlemen and the capitalism of industrialists. It happens especially forcefully in The Room.

Agata mentions *Koyaanisqatsi* the first time she sees The Room, and it does closely resemble that film's sense of controlled, mechanized mania. It's an enormous, multi-storey concrete atrium dominated visually by two things, on an axis so that the link between the two is unavoidable. There is a web of criss-crossing escalators, which can take the client to the underwriter at speed. These align with the open-plan offices on every side, creating a sort of visual simulation of industrial activity. It's hard to remember that nothing is actually being *produced* here, and that the look of some putative industrial hub is quoted purely for the purposes of immaterial, literally speculative, finance. The open floors and the dynamism of the escalators draw the eye straight away to the most sentimental of the assembled, decontextualized objects, the Lutine Bell. What you see is a neoclassical rostrum housing the bell itself, made in the 1920s, all mahogany and Corinthian columns, with an antiquated clock on top. The bell inside is rung when a member of the Royal Family dies, and on the rare occasions when a ship they have insured sinks, as was its original function. After that, look up, and you'll see a glass barrel-vaulted roof. You're in a gigantic 1980s version of The Crystal Palace, the 1851 iron-and-glass fantasia that Wiener considered British industrial capitalism's unsurpassed zenith. These two emotive remnants are what the whole high-tech assemblage revolves around. Like the Gothicism of the services on the façade, the Room is a quite ridiculously thrilling thing to behold; you have to catch your breath and remind yourself where you are. What this is.

With its glazed lifts, moving parts, girders, cranes, components all crammed into a tight, fierce, metallic mesh, the Lloyd's has always exerted (on me, at least) much the same shivers-down-spine effect as 'Strings of Life', or 'Trans-Europe Express': a mechanical sublime that sweeps away any residual humanist resistance with your willing participation. Fully aware of this, the architect has also left us a series of get-out clauses here. Rogers was and is a figure of the soft left; as a Labour Party peer, he may have been

one of those who were the NHS's unlikely last line of defence in the House of Lords. The other stylistic influence here, one which Rogers draws attention to in his books, was the unbuilt projects of the early Soviet Union. The lifts shooting up and down the metal frame are taken from the Vesnin brothers' Leningradskaya Pravda project; the overwhelming metal-on-metal rush of the street façade is taken from Iakov Chernikhov; the irregular, techno-Gothic approach to the skyscraper is from Ivan Leonidov. So add to the list of ironies that the era when the USSR was considered to be capitalism's gravedigger is here being evoked, on the eve of its suicide, for the purposes of the forces that would soon drag its territory into gangster capitalism. Another get-out clause is adaptability. The building is adorned at the top by fragments of the cranes used to construct it, as if to tell us that the thing is in flux; the floors, too, are moveable. The suggestion seems to be that one day it could all be made into something else by someone else. The building has just been Grade 1 listed, so that's certainly not happening, pending another glorious revolution. Then there's the promise of an organic, reformed and reformist city, which made Rogers the spokesman for New Labour's laudable but appallingly executed town planning policies, in which capacity he was probably the last major British architect to have any ideas about society whatsoever. From 1997 to 2010 the architect had a semi-governmental role advocating street life, compact cities, let's-be-like-Barcelona-rather-than-Texas. But the Lloyd's Building, no matter how astonishing it might be to look at as a passer-by, meets the street with a moat.

The real moment of madness in Lloyd's is the Adam Room. While much of Lloyd's evokes the more ruthless side of '80s cinema – a John Carpenter film, *The Terminator*, *Robocop* or *Gremlins 2* could all be shot here – this place is pure Tarkovsky. Specifically, it's the last scene of *Solaris*, where the alien intelligence re-creates the familial hearth. On the eleventh floor, the high-tech corridors, with their Gigerish sculptural ceilings, suddenly meet a white concrete block. That concrete block is decorated with classical details. Lloyd's is not generally thought of as postmodernism, in the usual sense of irony and historical montage – in fact it's often presented instead as 'late modernism',

a strident keeping-of-the-faith; Rogers' continuing role as antagonist to the Prince of Wales helps that presentation. Yet here's an absolutely pitch-perfect bit of pomo, a seemingly mocking, parodic reproduction of an Augustan eighteenth century thrown into a completely alien context.

Walk into the concrete block, and you're as far into the heart of the establishment as a commoner is ever likely to get (one weekend, every September). The Adam Room, named after its designer, was originally part of Bowood House in Wiltshire, commissioned by the first Earl of Shelburne, and is rammed so full of objets d'art that ten head-bangingly boring series of *Antiques Roadshow* could be built around Michael Aspel inspecting it piece by piece. The sensation it creates is of reaching the inner sanctum of the great parasite itself; all that outside is just for show, a display of how sprightly and modern and with-it we are, a delicate subterfuge, an elaborate joke about deindustrialization where we can look at paintings of galleons while the shipyards are closed. In here, Lloyd's of London are the same organization that grew fat on the slave trade; the room is a time machine that physically brings Old Corruption back to the site of its inception. They play at modernization, but they always keep this place in reserve, are always able to return to it. Inside the Palladian bunker, we circle round the table for our allotted time.

The City's Broken Borders

The Square Mile has always been distinct from the proletarian areas around it, although they are very close in proximity. The markets of Petticoat Lane, Spitalfields and Smithfield, the lawyers and Improved Dwellings for the Labouring Classes in Holborn, the teeming, radical slums of Clerkenwell or Whitechapel, the warehouses of Shoreditch and Hoxton, the interzones just beyond London Bridge in Borough and Bermondsey, all were in recent memory emphatically Not City; the last decade has seen this change radically. The Griffin statues – mythical monsters that guard gold, don't forget – that mark the boundary of the Corporation of London's feudal jurisdiction are a leftover from the 'Ring of Steel' that was put here in response to the IRA's

bombing campaign in the early '90s, as are the little observation posts that often adjoin them. The road blocks went a long time ago, but the infrastructure is in place to reassert them at any time, as a day of protest in the City always makes clear. All that security is now part of the City's particular infrastructure, which you could enjoy as being part of some dystopian film had it not become so everyday. The Bloomberg-branded plant pots next to Holborn Viaduct, the little TV screens shaped like dustbins round the corner from the Guildhall ... Beyond the Griffins are the areas into which the City has spilled. This shouldn't be overstated; few hedge fund managers are likely to be renting ex-council flats in Aldgate, preferring the old money of Mayfair and Marylebone, and much of the Old Guard surely still makes its way to Reigate or Surbiton at 5.30 pm. Yet enough of it has happened to have had a seismic effect on inner eastern London. This isn't just a matter of extending the offices north and east, as in the munificent, now-mutilated mock-agera of Broadgate, but something more unprecedented – a section of the rich have returned to the metropolitan centre to live, just as all those planning papers said they should. It's the only place where it has really occurred on a large scale, and the result, rather than a jolly knees-up where barrow-boy and banker (as per the pub in Borough) meet on equal terms, is a truly epic class cleansing.

In visual terms the results are not quite what would have been expected. For instance, when the down-at-heel squares, mews and terraces of Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove were gentrified, they went up in the world aesthetically – newly clean, tidy and scrupulously kept. The City's borders are still squalid in appearance, a chaos of graffiti-caked warehouses, derelict pubs, unlovely estates, ubiquitous rubbish and desperate, often homeless wanderers; the difference is that you now have to be one of the 1 per cent (or a council tenant) to be able to afford living there. The City does not tidy up its edges; it couldn't even if it wanted to, such things being in the hands of the cash-strapped municipalities of Hackney, Camden and Southwark. Sometimes it directly colonizes them, to alarming effect, by simply leaping over the Griffins and parachuting glass and steel into them. This can be seen in Foster's unforgivable emasculation of Spitalfields Market,

Nicholas Grimshaw's blue-glass troll creeping up through Aldgate to Whitechapel, and most obviously, the leap cross-river into Borough, in the form of Piano's Shard. The movement that interests me most, perhaps because it is the stealthiest, is the movement south of the river, across London and Tower Bridge into the City of Southwark.

Across London Bridge, aside from the unavoidable Ryugyong Hotel that now bestrides the railway station, there are subtler signs of the City's colonization. The river, usually a location for prosperous housing, is at first blocked off by the stone-clad '80s offices of 1 London Bridge, so you walk on the main road, past the overhead walkway of a surely soon-to-be-demolished concrete shopping arcade, and then get to the river at Shad Thames. This is, if you can screen from your eyes the souvenir shops and offensively-priced eateries, one of London's great ur-modernist spaces – a dense conglomeration of stark, functionalist brick warehouses with walkways and gantries thrown across them – an incredibly exciting urban set-piece, which Disneyfication cannot quite destroy. Upriver for a few yards, and you're now at a place called More London. More London in what manner, you may ask? More 'witty' public art, perhaps; more glazed office blocks and whimsical landscape features, and definitely more private security, but it's pessimistic to consider these all inherent properties of London. It's an instructive space, because on the face of it, More London avoids all the things that make the City itself desolate. There's a mix of uses – a couple of theatres and some housing close by, rather than solely underwriters, merchant banks, multinationals and such. There is a big 'public' Thameside promenade, although as this is privately-owned space you'd be advised not to do anything naughty on it, like, say, picket the offices of KPMG. The key building however is public, the headquarters of the Greater London Authority. Designed, like most of More London, by Foster & Partners, it follows the Reichstag model of 'transparency' in form and, pretty please, in function also; but it is notable for not being owned by the GLA itself. They have a lease from the developers. Not only did the GLC's County Hall get sold off for a hotel, an aquarium, a *Star Wars* exhibition and 'Dali Universe', but its alleged replacement was not, in the

era of the property-owning democracy, allowed to own its own home. The emasculation of local government is complete – the GLA exists on the City’s sufferance, not the other way round.

Bermondsey – for that is where we are – is notoriously (and has always been) one of the poorest Zone 1 districts, and one so authentically Cockney that a certain type of writer gets very dewy-eyed here. The housing isn’t very proper Cockney, however, and there are few stock-brick terraces left; you have to go as far east as Deptford for the built fabric to really resemble Dickensian London, if that’s what you’re after. The main road, just off More London, is taken up by the mammoth development of 1890s Peabody Trust tenements that screened slums from the visitors to the new Tower Bridge – on a real metropolitan scale, if not a ‘human’ one. But follow the riverside and the contrasts get sharper. The housing developments here are alternately carved out of old warehouses or designed anew by enduring ’80s postmodernists CZWG. These architects always highlighted the rupture they made with the existing fabric, always signposted their interventions and their lack of historical fidelity. In the middle of these purple and pink housing complexes and fluted, art deco-style devices is a seemingly Corbusian building, small and apparently rational. This is the Design Museum, designed in 1989 by Conran, who remoulded a 1950s stock-brick and concrete warehouse to make it look as much as possible like a white-walled Le Corbusier villa from 1926. In the process, the joins were no longer visible, the historical fiction was hidden; the raw and untutored aesthetic of industry became a good-taste ‘industrial aesthetic’. It’s one of the most influential buildings of the last couple of decades.

Eventually, this riverside of yuppiedromes is interrupted, at least as a public promenade. But it is continuous: apart from the derelict sheds of Convoys Wharf and later the Thames Barrier, there is an almost unbroken strip of ‘stunning developments’ stretching along both sides of the river as far as Thamesmead, Barking and beyond; one of the most striking and seldom commented-on changes in London over the last decade. An entire linear city of executive housing now stretches for miles along the Thames, without ever seeming to have been planned or discussed;

there was no consultation, no vote about whether London wanted its formerly working river to become a green glass, red terracotta and aluminium balcony Riviera. Even architecturally, pickings here are slim; the Boroughs have none of the Corporation of London's capacity to dictate quality to developers.

So we fork off the river here, past high-end furniture stores and the empty space where until very recently the decaying deco husk of Chambers Wharf and Cold Storage stood, to the unfortunately named Dickens Estate. This was where the late proleface angel Jade Goody grew up. Architecturally it is undistinguished, a completely standard piece of municipal modernism. At the time, Bermondsey could have had so much more; today, it could have so much less, like its people being 'decanted' into Eltham while their homes are redeveloped into an exciting offer of one- and two-bedroom flats, of which 25 per cent are affordable or shared ownership. Accordingly, the Dickens is worth defending. Tree-filled greens stand in front of stock-brick blocks of four storeys, with a public square at the heart of it. That square, though hardly jumping with energy and optimism, evidently still serves its function. Rosa's Café, corner shops, charity shops, a printers, a hairdresser called Spendloads-Please. It's easy to say it's depressing, but look at the balconies, clearly very well used by the council tenants, and remember the humanism that existed even at this lowest level of public housing. Just on the other side of the arterial road is the Setchell Estate, a late 1970s 'vernacular' effort that provides a convincing pedestrian space, segregated from cars, while aiming for 'warmth' in its deep pitched roofs. Like the Dickens, it's never going to be iconic, but it similarly maintains a working-class outpost. Its low terraces and perimeter blocks, organized around greens and old people's homes survives, for now, as public housing, Right to Buy notwithstanding. It is places like this that are being targeted by the current reforms to Housing Benefit and council tenure; how, ask the letter-writers to the *Metro*, can these people justify living in such a high-rent area? Who do they think they are, living in a council flat round the corner from the Design Museum?

A Walk Along the Highwalks

There are two moments, though, when the City overlaps with the seeming antithesis of the rapacious capitalism it embodies and propagates. One of them is Middlesex Street, or ‘Petticoat Lane’. This old centre of the rag trade is still full of public housing, much of it inter-war council flats of three or four storeys. Neither shops nor people are City types in the slightest; wits are sharper, without the aid of cocaine. It’s a sudden plunge right into real London, and vies with Poplar for the most vertiginous juxtaposition of rich and poor in Europe. These places were mostly owned by the LCC, now by Tower Hamlets, and hence are often left to rot. The City’s own post-war housing projects, however, are still a revelation. It’s incredible at this distance to think that the City could have paid for the Petticoat Square Estate, a place which is, unlike some of the City’s other housing projects, still largely uncolonized. This estate, an assemblage of taut angles, overhead walkways, brick and concrete geometries and an elegant skyline, shows that the post-war consensus was in some ways a genuine compromise, rather than merely a holding operation on the part of capital – it was once so dominant that it even cowed the Square Mile into conforming, into building low-cost, high-quality housing for its poorer rate-payers. It is hard to say how long this place will last – but the other two major City housing schemes surely have a very secure future indeed.

The best approach to the Barbican and Golden Lane is along the City of London’s Highwalk system. This is a survivor of the replanned, post-Blitz city of Patrick Abercrombie and later William Holford, which entailed a continuous system of walkways liberating the pedestrian from the ground. It’s hard to work out what the rationale here was, exactly; there are no hills to connect, and aside from the planners’ own creations such as Queen Victoria Street, not much in the way of congested arterial roads for the pedestrian to cross, although pre-congestion charge there was certainly abundant and obnoxious traffic. Whatever the reasoning, now it forms part of the City’s counter-intuitive, labyrinthine system of circulation, as much an intriguing eccentricity as the alleyways and Inns. Also, given that the Highwalks are not

always commercially successful in letting their rentable space, their promenades provide some of the more characterful places in the City, where tailors and launderettes haven't totally been supplanted by Tie Rack and Costa. It's a wonderful place to get yourself deliberately lost on a Sunday, full of architectural curios; Brutalist pavilions, concrete canopies to protect smokers from the rain, unexpected views of the ruins of London Wall. The Museum of London is here, its clipped volumes enlivened recently by a collection of placards from anti-cuts marches (would that they had marched through here). The Highwalks are not fussy about style; their longest section starts just off St Paul's and runs as much into Terry Farrell's postmodernist space-grabber at Alban Gate as it does past Basil Spence's dynamic, futurist law courts. The eventual terminus of these Highwalks is the Barbican.

As municipal housing, the Barbican, designed between the 1950s and the '80s by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, is a more complicated proposition than Golden Lane or Petticoat Square: never public housing in the strict sense, although certainly not wholly intended as the luxury enclave it is now. The Right to Buy had as drastic an effect here as anywhere else, it's just that the stockbrokers weren't interested in erecting pediments onto their concrete maisonettes. It's hard to know where to begin with it as a piece of town planning. The achievement, though scorned at the end by a guilt-ridden architectural culture that had replaced its modernist dogmas with a far worse traditionalist pessimism, is astonishing. There is no better piece of twentieth-century town planning in the UK, in terms of scope, quality, and sheer architectural power and melodrama. As a monument to belief in the future, the belief that the old certainties don't matter, that we can live in new ways, with a new conception of space, in a new, democratic city space unencumbered by cars, malls, pettiness and ugliness, it is so magnificent that it's hard not to simply applaud. That it should be occupied largely by brokers and cultural bureaucrats is a tragedy, although when the blue plaque brigade get here they can note the former residences of John Smith, Arthur Scargill and Benazir Bhutto. But aside from the sheer pleasure of its Brutalist-baroque grandeur, the Barbican is mainly of use for deflecting every anti-modernist, anti-urban shibboleth going – it's a high-density



arrangement in beefy raw concrete of towers and walkways, without an inch of ‘real streets’, without an iota of ‘defensible space’, that is doing very well, thank you. It is the architectural equivalent of the prevalent socialism for the rich.

However, a socialism for the poor that would be worthy of the name was also built here, around the same time, by the same architects, and the gap is at first almost imperceptible. To walk from the Barbican to Golden Lane, you go past the Barbican’s YMCA (as Barbican historian David Heathcote points out, imagine planning permission being granted in the contemporary City of London for a tower block of *teenagers*), and then come to Crescent House, along Goswell Lane. This was in fact built before the Barbican, though it uses an identical architectural language of bush-hammered concrete and baroque curves. Pass through its pubs and caffs, under its pilotis, and you’re at the first, 1950s stage of Golden Lane, a series of tough but elegant blocks of flats, with delicately considered public spaces in between. The small pond and garden that sits below some of these flats is one of the most quietly romantic spaces in the entire city. Once, things like this were considered ours as of right.

Gentrification has reached here, of course; Golden Lane is a place where some of London’s working class plainly manage

to live well next door to architects who are paying through the nose for the same flats. Yet, for the moment, this is one of the places in the UK that really shows how we can create alternatives, how we can create a new, better and more egalitarian city. It's unexpected to find it in the City of London, but there it is, hiding in plain sight. In order to come into being it does need the intervention of the state, of planning, of the division of labour, of technology and industry. Some of these are things rejected by the Occupiers so nearby at St Paul's, Broadgate and Finsbury Square, and in that, they were more Thatcher's children than they might think. If there is hope in the City and in the city, it lies in the possible conjunction of these two estates and the camp at St Paul's. Here the latter's direct democracy, their egalitarianism and anti-capitalism might lose its off-grid, anti-industrial narcissism, and discover the existence, even now, just about, of a fragment of the socialist, egalitarian, modernist city. That encounter needs to happen, and it needs to happen urgently. It is potentially where the future of British architecture and urbanism lies, if it is not to remain the exterior decoration of evil.

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Woolwich, March 2012

Notes

- 1 For reasons of already overstuffed space, I can't say as much here about this impressive building as I would like; I deal with it at considerable length in 'Zaha Hadid and the Neoliberal Avant-Garde', *Mute*, 2011.
- 2 The MP in question is Nicholas Boles. Toby Helm and Richard Rogers, 'Tory MP calls for local government planning to be replaced by "chaos"', *Guardian*, 18 December 2010
- 3 The first of these took precedence in both the campaign's slogans and the campaign itself, but was usually shortened, inaccurately, to 'anti-fees protests', when the abolition of EMA and the 80 per cent cuts to Humanities funding were every bit as much an issue, albeit less easy to present as the whining of overprivileged middle class youth.
- 4 James Meek, 'In Broadway Market', at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2011/08/09/james-meek/in-broadway-market/>.
- 5 The North, that is, as defined by Sheffield-based geographer Danny Dorling, in his essential *So You Think You Know About Britain?* (London, 2011) – a line that begins just below the West Midlands conurbation and Nottinghamshire, and then sweeps down to encompass all of Wales. It is, he claims, the starkest divide in Europe, sharper in terms of wealth and quality of life than North and South Italy or East and West Germany. The problem with Dorling's definition is that, while broadly convincing, it has to be adapted on close examination into a West Bank-style mass of enclaves and exclaves; Tower Hamlets, Chatham or Plymouth have to become colonies of the North, York, Durham and Edinburgh exclaves of the South.
- 6 See *A Guide to the New Ruins*, passim.
- 7 Peter C. Baker, 'Eric's World', thenational.ae, 1 May 2008.
- 8 The income required to purchase an 'affordable' home in London is usually over £20,000 a year; that disqualifies most of the residents of Robin Hood Gardens. Even more drastically, the coalition government's definition of

- ‘affordable’ is 80% of market rent, which definitively disqualifies nearly all council tenants.
- 9 Will Hurst, ‘New Robin Hood Gardens Residents’ Survey Challenges Demolition’, *Building Design* 26 June 2009.
 - 10 In Nowa Huta, the Polish steeltown which Mittal bought up and down-sized post-1989, artists put up airbrushed portraits of Mittal on the sides of buildings, on the spaces that Communist Party leaders would once have occupied. It’s more apt.
 - 11 A phrase taken from an internal Tory policy agenda briefing, proudly uncovered and publicized by Neanderthal conservative blogger Guido Fawkes at order-order.com, 6 December 2010.
 - 12 See IWCA’s ‘FAQ’ at: iwca.info.
 - 13 My information here comes from an article in *Leopard* magazine, ‘Aberdeen’s Tower Blocks’, by Mark Chalmers. See leopardmag.co.uk/feats, May 2009.
 - 14 See Andrea Klettner, ‘Diller Scofidio & Renfro triumphs in Aberdeen City Park competition’, *Building Design*, bdonline.co.uk/news, 16 January 2012.
 - 15 Or, at least, for the town planning competence of local government’s elected functionaries.
 - 16 Quoted in Gordon Murray, ‘Appreciating Cumbernauld’, *Architectural Design* 76/1, Profile 179 (2006).
 - 17 This is in fact the clock from the demolished St Enoch Station in Glasgow; taken here under Copcutt and proudly displayed in *Gregory’s Girl*, it was attached to its current nondescript corner when the Antonine Centre was built.
 - 18 My guide made a short film about the graffito, in which the ‘significance of this text is never explained but it is, in essence, the same story that is told about similar plots of land in every city: a story of dispossession, exclusion, privatization and clearance.’ See danieljewesbury.org/gilligan.html and ‘Opposition to Barry Gilligan apartments’, bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland, 18 July 2011.
 - 19 Martin Pawley, ‘From Modernism to Terrorism’, in *Terminal Architecture* (London: Reaktion, 1997), p. 152.

General Index

- Abercrombie, Patrick 179, 358
Aberdeen, David xxxiii
Aberdeen City Council 279
Adam, Robert 270
Aedas 27, 340
Agents of Change (AOC) xxvii
Ahrends Burton Koralek 54, 196
Alford Hall Monaghan Morris
xxvii, 18, 21, 34
Alison Hutchinson and Partners
267
Alsop, Will 44–5, 54, 120–2
Anderson, Terry xx
ArcelorMittal Orbit, the 34, 46
Archial 45
architects xxv–xxviii
Architects Co-Partnership 194,
241–2
Architects' Journal 27
Architects' Revolutionary Council
344
architects, unemployed xxv
Arkwright, Richard 60, 64
arms industry 82–4, 85
art galleries 38, 42–4, 50, 64,
118–19, 130
Arup 46, 195, 200, 219, 245
Associated Architects 100–1
Atelier 5 168
Axis Design Group 114–15
BAE Systems 82, 85, 87, 295–6
Balls, Ed xiv
Balmond, Cecil 46, 47
Banksy 140
Barratt Homes xvii, 24, 321
Bauhaus 52, 76
Bauman Lyons 232
BBC xxi
BedZED, Beddington Zero (Fossil)
Energy Development 172–3,
175
Behnisch Architekten xxx
Belfast City Council 327
Bellway 211
Bennie, Claire 172
Benoy 98, 99–101, 216, 340
Benson & Forsyth 250
Big City Plan, the 92, 97–101, 107,
114
Big Society, the xviii, xxiii–xxv,
171, 174–5
Birmingham City Council
113–14
Birmingham Municipal Housing
Trust 114–16

- Blade Runner* (film) 49
 Blair, Tony xxxv, 1, 195, 312
 BOC Gases 53
 bombed cities 177–8
 Bothe Richter Tehrani xxx
 Boulton, Matthew 105
 Bovis 14, 15
 Boyesen, Sebastian 246
 Brandt, Bill 67
 Breker, Arno 338
 Brennan J. J. 316
 Briggs, Asa 104
 Bristol Byzantine style 135
 Bristol Council 138
 Bristol Development Corporation
 145
 British National Party 17, 18, 19
 British Steel 53
 Broadbent, Stephen 230
 Broadway Malyan 16, 340, 347
 Brown, Gordon xiv
 Browne Report, the xiv–xv
 Bruce Report, the 286
 Brutalism 7–9, 41, 101–2, 152,
 155–7, 198–9, 220, 244, 300
 Bryants Ltd 93–5
 Bryce, David 252
Building Design xlix, 27, 318
 Building Design Partnership 51–2,
 60, 65, 67, 68, 70, 70–8, 187,
 215, 264, 265, 314–15, 340
 Building Schools for the Future
 programme xv–xvi
 Bullingdon Club, the 192
 Burdett, Ricky xiii
 Burton, Decimus 322
 Business Improvement Districts
 166, 216
 Busson, Arpad ‘Arki’ xvi
 Butterfield, William 195
 Cacciari, Massimo, *Architecture and
 Nihilism* 285
 Californian Modernists 168
 Cameron, David xviii, xxii, 38,
 110, 326–7
 Campbell & Arnott 259
 Capita 340
 capitalism xxi
 Carillion 202
 Cathedral Cities 225–6
 Chamberlin, Powell and Bon 359
 Chapman Taylor 71, 138, 216, 340
 Chernikhov, Iakov 351
 Chipperfield, David xxvii
 city status 59
 Civic Trust movement 182
 CivicArt 11
 Coates, Wells 152–3
 Cobbett, William 153
 Cole, John xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvi
 Coleman, Alice 16
 Collective Architecture 294
 colonial architecture 313–16
 Commission for Architecture and
 the Built Environment xvi,
 xxvi, 347
 Community Land Trust xxiv–xxv
 community-driven development
 xxiv
 Comprehensive Design Architects
 260
 Connolly, James 258
 Constructivism 153, 220
 context 341–3
 Copcutt, Geoffrey 300–4, 306
 Corus 53
 cottage industry 142
 council housing xv
Coventriren 124
 Crabtree, William 180
 Craig, James 269

- creative class, the 44–5
 crime 16
 Crossrail scheme 2
 Croydon Tramlink, the 170–1
 Cullen, Gordon 128
 Cullinan, Edward 144
 Cullinan and Partners, Edward 22
 Cumbernauld Development Corporation 297
 CZWG 356
- Daily Mail* reader, the xii
 Dalwood, Hubert 216
 Darling, Alistair xii
 de Soissons, Louis 180
 defensible space 15, 318–21
 deficit cutting xvii
Demolition (TV programme) 302
 depopulation 311
 Dickens, Charles, *Hard Times* 60
 Diller Scofidio & Renfro 282
 Dixon, James 138
 Dixon Jones 193
 Docklands Light Railway 22–5, 26–7
 Dorman Long steelworks 53
 Duncan Smith, Iain 235, 292
 Dunster, Bill 173
 Dutch Modernism 215
- EasyJet xiii
 Egeraat, Erick van 42–4
 Elder, Lester & Partners 49, 50
 Elder & Cannon 250
 Elliott, Archibald 255
 EMBT xxix
 emerging markets xxv
 English Defence League 17
 English Heritage 55, 102, 188
 Enterprise Zones xiii, xvii–xviii, xxv, xlix, 287, 311, 317, 327
- Epstein, Jacob 129
Eric Lyons and Span (RIBA) 16
 Erskine, Ralph xxiv, 42, 70
 Essex County Council 15
 Essex Design Guide 321
 Experian 38
- Farrell, Sir Terry 24, 265, 270, 359
 Fashion Architecture Taste (FAT) xxvii, 45, 47, 169
 Faulkner-Browns 95
 Festival of Britain 75, 226
 Fidler, Alwyn Sheppard 93
 Fielden Clegg Bradley 144, 150
 Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism* xl
 Florida, Richard 44, 142
 Foggo, Peter 341
 Foot, Michael xxxv
 Foreign Office Architects 216–18
 Forum for Alternative Belfast 328, 330
 Foster, Norman 99, 165, 344, 344–5, 349, 355
 Foucault, Michel xlii
 Fraser, Malcolm 250, 260
 free schools xiv, xvi, xxv, xlix
 Freeman, Peter 49
 free-market ideology xvii
 Friedrich, Caspar David xxxi
 Future Systems 100
 Futurists 197
- ‘G20 Meltdown’ protests 336–9
 garden cities xxii
 Garden Festivals xxiii, xlv
 garden suburbs xx–xxi
 Gardner, A. B. 278
 Garman, Kathleen 119
Gastarbeiter xi
 Geddes, Patrick 256–7, 260, 267
 Gehry, Frank 152

- Gibberd, Frederick 98
 Gibson, Donald 124–5
 Gilbert, Wallis 241
 Gilbert Associates 270
 Gilligan, Barry 317, 330
 Ginzburg, Moisei 153
 Gladstone, William 38
 Glasgow Corporation 288, 296–7
 Goldberg, Bertrand 94–5
 Goldfinger, Erno 27
 Gollins Melvin Ward 343
 Google 225–8
 Gordon Riots, the xlvii
 Gould, Jeremy, *Plymouth: Vision of a Modern City* 188
 Govan Housing Association 294
 Gove, Michael xv, xvi, xxii
 Gowan, James 68–9, 219, 220
 graffiti 141, 317, 327
 Gravell, John 73–4
 Greater London Authority 342, 355–6
 Green Party 149–50
 Grenfell-Baines, George 70, 72–6
 Grenfell-Baines, Milena 70, 74–6
 Grimshaw, Nicholas 24, 106, 209–10, 211, 237, 349, 355
 Gropius, Walter 76
A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain xiv, xlix, 6, 285
 Hackett, Mark 328
 Hadid, Zaha xvi, 8, 35, 295, 303
 Hamiltons 340
 Hammond, Philip xxii
 Hanley, Lynsey, *Estates: An Intimate History* 112, 116
 Harland and Wolff, shipbuilders 325, 327
 Harman, Harriet xiv
 Harper, Ewen & J. Alfred 98
 Haworth Tompkins xxvi
 Healey, Denis 125
 health centres 202–3
 Heath, Edward 157
 Heathcote, David 360
 Henman, William 108
 Henning Larsen 186–7
 heritage sites, protection of xviii
 Herzog & de Meuron xxx–xxxii
 Heseltine, Michael xxiii
 High Modernism 196–7, 220
 High-Tech style 348–53
History of English Architecture 196
 Hobsbawm, Eric xx
 Hodder, Stephen 196
 Hodge, Margaret 18
 Holden, Charles 136, 180
 Holford, William 358
 Homes and Communities Agency 47
 Hopkins, Michael 34, 261, 349
 Hoskins, Gareth 250
 Hoskins, George Gordon 41
 housebuilding 2–3
 housing
 affordable 18–19
 council xv
 modernist 211
 municipal 112–16
 Scottish 252–3, 266
 social xxvi–xxvii
 Housing Associations xxvii, xlv, 250–1, 257–8, 259, 267, 294, 317, 325
 Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders 42
 Howard, Ebenezer 86
 Howells, Glenn 95–6, 107, 145
 Hunt, Tristram 5
 Hunter and Partners 202
 Hurd, Robert 258

- Hurd Rolland 316
 Huxley, Aldous, *Brave New World* 48
- ICI 48–9, 51–2, 53
 IKEA 128, 130, 166, 175
 immigration 18
 Independent Working Class Association 205–6
 industrial decline xix–xxiii
 Ingham, Keith 65, 73–4
 IRA 312, 354
- Jacobs, Jane 108
 The Death and Life of Great American Cities 104
 The Economy of Cities 104
 Jacobsen, Arne 196
 Jencks, Charles 12
 Jerde Partnership 128
 Jewesbury, Daniel 317
 Johnson, Boris 34, 163
 Johnson, E. A. 239
 Jones, Adrian 232
 Joseph, Keith xix, 14, 104
 JT Group 143
 Jubilee Arts 120
- Kaplicky, Jan 100
 Kapoor, Anish 46–7
 Keiller, Patrick 312
 Kennedy Fitzgerald 321
 kettling 336–9
 Kier 114
 Kinnock, Neil 244–5
 knowledge economy, the 38
 Kohn Pedersen Fox 340
 Kuhne, Eric 11, 12, 97, 327
- Labour xiv, xviii
 Lanarkshire Council 300
 landscaping xxix–xxx
 Lansbury, George 25–6
 Lansley, Andrew xiv
 Larkin, Philip 123
 Lasdun, Denys 22, 27, 181, 219, 220
 Lautner, John 226
 Le Corbusier 220, 267
 Leese, Richard xiii
 Leonidov, Ivan 351
 Levete, Amanda 100
 Liberty Living xxxviii
 libraries 101–3, 136, 151, 169, 243–4, 314
 Libyan crisis, the xxv–xxvi
 Ling, Arthur 124–5
 listed buildings 50–1, 55, 102, 188
 Lister, Malcolm xxxiii
 Littlewood, Joan 120–1, 350
 Livingstone, Ken xiii, 31, 32, 342, 344, 347
 Lloyd’s of London 348–53
 localism xxiv
 Long, Kieran 31
 lottery-funding 210
 Lovells 114
 Lucas, Caroline 149–50
 Lutyens, Edwin 87, 180, 218, 221
 Lynn, William Henry 86, 314
 Lyons, Eric 13, 15, 143, 154–5, 168
- McChesney Architects 69
 MacCormac Jamieson Pritchard 195
 Maccreeanor Lavington xxvi, 21
 McGuirk, Tony 70–1, 77
 McIntyre, Jody xliii
 Mackay, David 187
 McKeith, George 279
 Mackintosh, Charles Rennie 262
 McLaughlin, Niall 33

- MacMillan, Andy 198, 300
 McMorran & Whitby 340
 Madely, Hickton 45
 Madin, John 96–7, 101–3, 127
 Major, John 1, 347
 Make 165
 Mandelson, Peter 312
 Manzoni, Herbert 93–4, 97, 100,
 111, 112
 market discipline xxii
 markets 215–16
 Marks Barfield 151
 Martin, Leslie 196
 Marx, Karl 104
 Matthews, Chris 232
 Maudsley, Alan 93, 102
 Meades, Jonathan 92
 On the Brandwagon (film) xliv
 Meadows, Alfie xliii
 Mecanoo 103
 Meek, James xlv
 megastructures 300–4
 Meier, Richard xxx
 Metropolitan Architecture 340
 Metropolitan District Councils xvi
 Metropolitan Enterprise Zone 3
 Metrotrams 170
 Metzstein, Isi 198, 300
 Middle England 1
 Middlesbrough Council 47
 Midland Metro, the 98–9
 Miliband, Ed xix, xlvi
 Millennium Villages 175
 Milner, Edward 69
 Miralles, Enric 260–2
 Mitchell, William 110–11
 Mittal, Lakshmi 34
 Modernism 14, 41, 74, 95–6, 99,
 124–5, 152–3, 169, 178, 193–7,
 228
 Moro, Peter 181
 Morris, William xx
 Moussavi, Farshid 217
 Mowlam, Mo 312
 muf xxvii, 20
 Murdoch, Rupert xiv
 Murphy, Douglas 8–9, 31
 Murphy, Richard 250, 258, 259,
 260, 264
 Murray, Alan 260
 museums 63–5, 78–9, 296, 303, 323
 Nairn, Tom xx
 National Health Service xiv, 6, 243
 National Trust xvii
 National Union of Mineworkers
 xxxiii
 neoliberalism xi–xii, xviii–xix,
 xix–xx, 1, 142
 New, Keith 227
 New Labour xi, xiii–xvi, xix, xxiv,
 xxvi, xxxii, xxxviii–xxxix, 1, 18,
 30, 42, 99, 139, 144, 250
 New Progress Housing
 Association 69
 New Towns 7, 13–17, 49, 60, 75,
 123, 297, 301, 305, 306–8
 Newman, Oskar 15
 Niemeyer, Oscar 343
 Nord 35
 Northern Gothic 86
 Nouvel, Jean 340, 341
 Occupy Movement 333–9, 361
 O'Donnell and Tuomey 323
 Oldenburg, Claes 44, 45
 Olympic Delivery Authority 31
 OMI Architects 78
 Osborne, George xix
 Panter Hudspith 232
 parks 69–70

- parmo 40
 Parr, Martin, *Boring Postcards* 63
 Parry, Eric 340
 Pathfinder xvi–xvii, 328
 Pawley, Martin 321
 Peabody, George 172
 Peabody Trust xxvi, 172, 356
 pedestrians 11, 94, 124, 297–8, 303
 Perret, Auguste 179
 Petit, Chris 134
 Pevsner, Nikolaus 68, 77, 193, 196,
 199, 220, 240
 *Visual Planning and the
 Picturisque* 192, 198
 Piano, Renzo 343, 346–7, 355
 picturesque planning 204–6
 Piloti 264
 Piratin, Phil 18
 PJMP 264
 planned towns 81, 86
 planning reforms xvii
 Plymouth City Council 184
 Pocahontas 9
 Ponti, Gio 343
 Poots, Michael xxxiv, xxxvi
 Pop Art Districts 45
 pop culture 158
 Poplarism 25–6
 Porphyrios, Demetri 99
 Port of London Authority 8
 post-industrial towns 37–56
 post-war period 71–2
 Powell, Annie 236
 Powell Alport and Partners 243–4
 Prentis, Dave xxxiii
 Prescott, John xiii
 Price, Cedric 102, 120–1, 350
 Princes Street Panel 254–5
 Pringle Richard Sharratt 130
Private Eye 264
 Private Finance Initiative xiv, xv,
 1, 77, 105, 114, 119, 151, 175,
 196, 202, 237, 347
 problem areas 37
 protesters 333–9
 Pseudomodernism xxvii
 public art 49, 128, 243, 312,
 319–20, 355
 public sculpture 34, 44, 46–7, 50,
 52, 60–1, 98, 110–11, 129, 216,
 230, 239, 246, 303–4
 public services xviii
 public/private divide 38
 public–private partnerships xiv,
 127, 245, 269
 Pugin, Augustus Welsby xx
 Purnell, James xiv
 Pym, Francis 322
 Pyzik, Agata 1

 Qatari Diar 33, 347

 Radical Postmodernism xxvii–
 xxviii
 Rahman, Lutfur 26
 railways 38–9, 123, 191, 193, 237
 Ramsden, James 86
 Rat Boy xxiv
 Redcar and Cleveland Council
 54–5
 Rees, Peter 339
 regeneration 37–44, 122, 276–8,
 324
 Regional Development Agencies
 xvi, 2
 retail architecture 10–13
 Rick Mather Architects 196
 riots xlv–xlvii, 30, 110, 142, 146
 RMJM 65, 262, 267–8, 270
 Robinson, Dickon 172
 Rogers, Richard xiii, xv, 12, 16,
 247, 340, 347, 348–53

- van der Rohe, Mies 41, 341
 Royal Navy 183
 RUC 312
 Russell Diplock Associates 152
- St John, Caruso xxvii, 118
 Sansbury, Charles Edward 227, 239
 Saunders Architects 169
 Scandinavian influence 143
 Schumacher, Patrik 295
 Scorer, Sam 226–7, 230, 231
 Scott, Bill 303–4
 Scott, Giles Gilbert 7, 63, 180, 181
 Scott, Keith 70, 71–3
 Shopping Centre Design 72
 Scott, Ridley 49
 Scottish National Party 249–50
 seaside attractions 157–61
 Secured by Design regulations
 115, 195, 321
 Seifert, Richard 152, 157, 165,
 343–4
 Sergison Bates 118
 Shapps, Grant xix, xxii, xxiv
 Sheffield City Council 14, 27
 Sheppard-Fidler, Alwyn 113
 Sherren, B. C. 181
 shopping malls 10–13, 21, 34, 40,
 50, 72, 76–7, 98, 138, 216–18,
 280–1, 301
 Simpson, Ian 95
 Skidmore Owings Merrill 340
 Sky News xii
 skyscrapers 341–7
 Smithson, Alison and Peter 27,
 196, 198, 199
 Smylie, John 317
 social Thatcherism xiv
 Society for the Protection of
 Ancient Buildings xx
 Southwood, Ivor xxiii
 Span Developments Ltd 13–14, 15,
 16, 154–5
 Spence, Basil 129, 258, 359
 squalor 1
 Squire and Partners xxxiii, xxxiv,
 xxxvi
 Stamp, Gavin 180
 Stephen George & Partners 218–19
 Stewart, Chris 263
 Stirling, Hector 182, 184
 Stirling, James 65, 68–9, 195,
 198–9, 219, 220, 341
 Stirling Prize 198
 Stock Woolstonecroft 33
 street art 140
 student accommodation xxxviii–
 xliv, 41, 218–19
 student movement xxxviii–xliv
 Sturgeon, Nicola 296
 Suburbia 163–75
 sustainable developments 171–3
 Sweet Toof 141
- Tafari, Manfredo 153
 The Sphere and the Labyrinth
 342–3
 Tagliabue, Benedetta xxix, 260–2
 Tait, Thomas 180, 255
 Tait and Alec French 180–1
 Taut, Bruno 18
 Tees Valley Development
 Corporation 39
 Tees Valley Regeneration 45
 ‘Temenos’ 46–7
 Terragni, Giuseppe 197
 terrorism 315, 317–18, 321, 354
 Tesco 141–2
 Thatcher, Margaret xviii, xix, xxii,
 195
 Thatcherism xiii, xvii–xviii, xxiii,
 245, 251

- Thomas, Alfred Brumwell 313
 Thomson, Alexander 289–90
 Thomson & Sandilands 293
 Tory–Whig coalition xiv–xix,
 xxiii, xxxix, xlix, 103, 114, 116,
 245
 town planning 136–40, 182–5, 335,
 339–41
 Townsend, Geoffrey 13
 trade unions xxxii–xxxvii
 traditionalism xxvi
 Transport & General Workers
 Union xxxiii
 Troubles, Northern Ireland 312,
 315, 317–18, 326
 Ulster Defensible Space
 Association 319–21
 Turner, Richard 322
- UK Uncut pickets xlii
 Ulster Defensible Space
 Association 318–21
 UNESCO xvii
 Ungless & Latimer 259
 Unison xxxii–xxxvii
 Unite xxxiii
 University of Lincoln 231–2
 urban regeneration xlv
 Urban Renaissance xiii–xix, 4, 12,
 59–60, 82, 84, 153, 163, 174,
 250, 267
 Urban Splash xlvi, 118, 184
 Urban Task Forces 12, 347
 Urban Trawls xlix–li
- Vesnin brothers 351
 Vickers 85, 87
 Victorian architecture 68–70, 166
 Vincent Harris, E. 135–6
 Vinoly, Rafael 214, 347
 Virtual shops 54
- voluntarism xxiv
- Wainwright, Oliver 31
 Wakerley, Arthur 212
 walkways 50, 302–3, 358–9
Wallpaper (magazine) 6
 war memorials 63
 Ward, Colin xxiii–xxiv
 Waterhouse, Alfred 152
 Watts Riots xlvii
 Webb, Aston 98
 Webb, Philip 45–6
 Weedon, Harry 214
 Wells-Thorpe and Partners 156
 Welsh Assembly 239, 245
 Welsh Labour Party 245
 Whicheloe Macfarlane 143
 Whitfield, William 335
 Wiener, Martin J., *English Culture
 and the Decline of the Industrial
 Spirit* xix–xxiii
 Wilkinson Eyre 151
 Willets, David xv, xxi
 Williams, Raymond xx
 Wilson, Harold 195
 Wilson, Hugh 299, 305
 Windsor, Charles 54–5, 72, 198,
 353
A Vision of Britain 72
 Wizzair xi
 Womersley, J. L. 93
 Womersley, Lewis 299
 Wood, Ellen Meiksins 270
 Wood, Sir Ian 281
 Wright, Frank Lloyd 8
- Youngman, G. P. 298–9, 305
- Zaera-Polo, Alejandro 217
 Zone 5 Strategy 163

Index of Places

- Abbey Meadows West, Leicester 211
- Aberdeen 250, 273–82
- Aberfan 238
- Armada Way, Plymouth 179–82
- Arndale Centre, Luton xiii
- Avonmouth 133, 144
- Barbican, the, London 358–60
- Barcelona 187
- Barking xxvi, 17–22
- Barrier Park 24
- Barrier Point 24
- Barrow Island 84–6
- Barrow-in-Furness 81–8, 275
- Basingstoke 59
- Bath 137, 180, 250, 252
- Becontree 18
- Beddington 171–3
- Belfast 311–31
- Titanic Quarter 324–8, 328
- Ulster Defensible Space Association 319–21
- Berlin 179, 180, 278, 286
- Bermondsey, London 356–7
- Billingham 37, 47, 48–52, 301
- Billingham Forum Theatre 50–1
- Birmingham xlvi, 1, 91–116, 130, 146, 170, 193, 212, 216, 269, 315, 318, 339
- Brindleyplace 99, 100
- the Bullring 99–101
- Corporation Street 97–8, 100
- Deritend 107–8
- Digbeth 105–7, 111, 114
- Handsworth 108–12
- Ladywood 112–16
- the Sentinels 94–5
- Birmingham Central Library 101–3
- Black Country, the 117
- Blackbird Leys, Oxford 192, 203–6
- Blackheath 14, 16
- Blackwood 245–6
- Blaenau Gwent 237
- Bluewater 10–13, 327
- Bournemouth 53
- Bourneville 112
- Bradford 71, 104
- Brighton and Hove 14, 149–61, 193, 240
- Brunswick Town 153–5
- Grand Avenue 155–7
- Brighton Pier 157–61
- Brindleyplace, Birmingham 99, 100

- Bristol xlv–xlvi, 1, 133–46, 184,
225, 230, 339
- Bristol Harbourside xxxi
Floating Harbour 144–5
High Kingsdown 143
Lewin’s Mead 139–40
St Mary Redcliffe 134–5
Stokes Croft 140–3
Temple Meads station 134,
145–6
- Brixton xlvi
- Brownfield Estate, Tower Hamlets,
London 27
- Brunswick Town, Brighton and
Hove 153–5
- Brynmawr 241–2
- Bullring, the, Birmingham 99–101
- Byker Estate, Newcastle-upon-
Tyne xxiv–xxv, 42, 70
- Cambridge 14, 192, 193, 194, 196,
200
- Canary Wharf, London 3, 26–7
- Canterbury 225
- Cardiff 235
- Carshalton 174–5
- Central Lancashire University
60
- Centre Point, London 344
- Chatham 3–6
- Chicago 88, 94–5
- Chipping Norton 2
- Chorley 69
- Clifton 120
- Clydeside xxii
- Corporation Street, Birmingham
97–8, 100
- Coventry 1, 104, 123–30, 138, 164,
179, 180, 182
- Coventry Cathedral 126, 128–30
- Cowley 203
- Cowley Road, Oxford 201–3
- Croydon, London xlvi, 163–75
Thornton Heath 168–70
- Cumbernauld, Glasgow 1, 286,
296–308
- Dagenham, London xxvi
- Darlington 38–9
- Dartford, London 6, 9, 16, 18, 269
- Deepdale, Preston 77–9
- Deritend, Birmingham 107–8
- Devonport 183
- Devonshire Dock Hall, Barrow-in-
Furness 82–3
- Didcot 192
- Digbeth, Birmingham 105–7, 111,
114, 275
- Drake Circus, Plymouth 186–8
- Dresden 129, 130
- Dublin 314
- Dudley 104
- Duffryn 246
- Durham 252
- East Ham, London 18
- Ebbfleet 7
- Ebbw Vale xlv, 242–3
- Eden Project 209–10
- Edinburgh 1, 193, 249–71, 285, 339
Holyrood 259–62
Leith xxxi, 265–71
Old Town 256–9, 263, 265, 269
Princes Street 253–5
Scottish Parliament 260–2
Waverley Station 251
- Ermine Estate, Lincoln 226
- Evelyn Grace Academy, Brixton
xvi
- ExCel conference centre 24–5
- Falls, the, Belfast 319–21

- Floating Harbour, the, Bristol
144–5
- Gateshead, Trinity Car Park 243
- Germany xxviii–xxxii
- Gherkin, the, London 342, 344–5
- Glasgow xxx, 60, 88, 91, 92, 182,
225, 250, 251, 252, 265, 274, 279,
285–308, 339
Cumbernauld 286, 296–308
Govan 275, 286, 287–96, 298,
300
- Gleadless Valley, Sheffield 14, 299
- Golden Lane, London 360–1
- Govan, Glasgow 275, 286, 287–96,
298, 300
- Grainger Town, Newcastle-upon-
Tyne 120
- Grand Avenue, Brighton and Hove
155–7
- Gravesend 7, 7–9
- Greater Manchester xxii
- Greenwich 1
- Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak
Jatha, Birmingham 109
- Hackbridge 171, 174
- HafenCity Hamburg xxviii–xxxii
- Halifax 71, 73, 104, 200
- Hamburg xxviii–xxxii
- Handsworth, Birmingham 108–12
- Harris Museum, Preston 63–5
- Heathrow Airport 2
- High Kingsdown, Bristol 143
- Highcross Centre, Leicester
216–18
- Hollywood Park, Barrow-in-
Furness 87, 88
- Holyrood, Edinburgh 259–62
- Hove, *see* Brighton and Hove
- Hull 164
- ICI Wilton 49, 51–2, 71, 73
- Isle of Dogs, London 1, 30, 333
- Ladywood, Birmingham 112–16
- Lava, Preston 62–3
- Le Havre 179
- Lea Valley Zone, London 31–2
- Leeds xxvi, 60, 62, 91, 104, 264
- Leeds-Bradford 91
- Leicester 1, 91, 209–22, 269
Abbey Meadows West 211
Highcross Centre 216–18
- Leicester Science Park 211
- Leicester University 218–22
National Space Centre 209–12,
222
- Leith, Edinburgh xxxi, 265–71
- Lewin’s Mead, Bristol 139–40
- Leyland 69
- Lincoln 1, 225–33
- Lincoln Cathedral 228–9
- St John the Baptist church, Lincoln
226–8
- Liverpool xlv, xlvi, 60, 71, 91, 92,
143, 171, 321
- Liverpool One 77
- Lloyd’s of London building,
London 348–53
- London xlv–xlvi, xviii, 1, 1–3, 60,
77, 92, 143, 179, 191, 225, 285,
286, 300, 318
the Barbican 358–60
Bermondsey 356–7
Broadway Market xxvi
Canary Wharf 3, 26–7
Centre Point 344
City of 333–61
Congress House xxxiii, xxxv
Docklands xviii
Elizabeth Garrett Anderson
building xxxiv–xxxv, xxxvi

- Golden Lane 360–1
 Isle of Dogs 1, 30, 333
 King's College xxxviii
 Lea Valley Zone 31–2
 Lloyd's of London building
 348–53
 London City Airport 22–3
 London Metropolitan
 University 22
 Middlesex, University of
 xxxix–xlii
 Millennium Dome 1
 More London 355–6
 Notting Hill 2
 Olympic Site 30–5
 One Canada Square 30
 Paternoster Square 333–6
 Peckham 166
 Pimlico, London xxvi, 172
 Robin Hood Gardens, Tower
 Hamlets 27–8, 29
 the Shard 345–7, 355
 skyscrapers 341–7
 Southwark 355–6
 the Square Mile 333–61
 St Paul's Cathedral 333–4
 Thamesmead 177
 Thornton Heath, Croydon
 168–70
 Tottenham 166
 Tower Hamlets 22, 25–
 Unison building xxxiii–xxxvii
 University College London
 xlii–xliii
 University of East London
 22–3
 Wapping 275
 Whitechapel 107
 Luton xiii
 Luton Airport xi–xiii, xviii
 Manchester xlvi, 60, 91, 92, 96,
 104, 138, 146, 149, 170, 286–7,
 299, 318, 328, 339
 Merthyr Tydfil 235, 238–41
 Middlehaven 44–8, 49, 54
 Middlesbrough 37–44, 59, 71, 122,
 247
 Middlesbrough College 45
 Middlesbrough Institute of Modern
 Art 42–3, 118
 Middlesex, University of, London
 xxxix–xlii
 Millennium Dome, London 1
 Milton Keynes 15, 16, 59, 149, 297
 Montreal 300
 More London 355–6
 Moscow 153, 278, 286
 Mountain Ash 241
 National Football Museum,
 Preston 78–9
 National Space Centre, Leicester
 209–12, 222
 New Art Gallery, Walsall 118–19,
 122
 New Ash Green 13–17
 New York 285
 Newcastle-upon-Tyne 60, 92, 138,
 143, 250
 Byker Estate xxiv–xxv, 42, 70
 Grainger Town 120
 Newham 22
 Newport 193, 235, 237–8, 246–7
 Newton Aycliffe 75
 Northern Ireland 311–12, 326–7,
 338
 Northfleet 7
 Notting Hill, London 2
 Nottingham xlvi, 91
 Okêcie airport, Warsaw xii

INDEX OF PLACES

- Olympic Site, London 30–5
 One Canada Square, London 30
 Oxford 2, 191–206
 Blackbird Leys 192
 Cowley Road 201–3
 the Radcliffe Camera 198–9
 Saïd Business School 193, 197
 Westgate Centre 200–1
- Paris xliv, 204, 285, 286, 350
 Pompidou Centre 350
 Park Hill, Sheffield xiv, 228
 Paternoster Square, London 333–6
 Peckham, London 166
 Perivale 241
 Peterlee 75
 Pimlico, London xxvi, 172
 Plymouth 177–88
 Armada Way 179–82
 Drake Circus 186–8
 Stonehouse 184–5
 Pompidou Centre, Paris 350
 Poplar 25–6, 30, 226, 358
 Preston 59–79
 Avenham Park 69–70
 Deepdale 77–9
 Fishergate 60
 Preston Bus Station 66–7, 71, 72,
 73, 73–4, 101–2
 Princes Street, Edinburgh 253–5
 Public, The, Walsall 119–22
- Queen’s University, Belfast 322–3
- Radcliffe Camera, the, Oxford
 198–9
 Reading 59, 191
 Redcar 37, 52–6
 Redcar Library 54–5
 Rhondda Cynon Taf 237
 Richmond 14
- Riverside Transport Museum,
 Glasgow 295, 303
 Robin Hood Gardens, Tower
 Hamlets, London 27–8, 29
 Rotterdam 278
 Russian Federation xii
- Saïd Business School, Oxford 193,
 197
 St John the Baptist church, Lincoln
 226–8
 St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol 134–5
 St Paul’s Cathedral, London 333–4
 St Petersburg 286
 Salford xlvi, 143
 Scotland 1, 249–51
 Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh
 260–2
 Shankill, the, Belfast 319–21
 Shard, the, London 345–7, 355
 Sheffield xxiv, 138, 170, 177, 180,
 182, 228, 299, 300
 Slough 191
 Solihull 91
 South Wales xxii
 South Yorkshire xxii
 Southampton 70, 143
 Southwark, London 355–6
 Soviet Union 351
 Square Mile, the, London 353–7
 Stockholm 308
 Stockton 37, 47
 Stokes Croft, Bristol 140–3
 Stonehouse, Plymouth 184–5
 Stratford 1, 32–5
 Sutton 171
 Swansea 235
 Swindon 2, 192
- Tate Institute 23
 Teesport 53

- Teesside xxii, 37–56
 Billingham 48–52
 Middlehaven 44–8, 49, 54
 Middlesbrough 37–44
 Redcar 37, 52–6
 Teesside University 41–2
 Temple Meads station, Bristol 134,
 145–6
 Thames Gateway 1–35, 50, 191,
 271
 Barking 17–22
 Bluewater 10–13, 327
 Chatham 3–6
 Dartford 9, 16, 18
 Ebbsfleet 7
 Gravesend 7–9
 New Ash Green 13–17
 Olympic Site 30–5
 Thamesmead, London 177
 Thornton Heath, Croydon,
 London 168–70
 Tilbury Power Station 8
 Titanic Quarter, Belfast 324–8,
 328
 Tottenham, London 166
 Tower Hamlets, London 22, 25–30
 Tredegar 243–4
 Trinity Car Park, Gateshead 243
 Tyneside xxii, 91
 Ulster Museum, Belfast 323
 University College London
 xlii–xliii
 University of Aston 105
 University of East Anglia 22
 University of East London 22–3
 Valleys, the, South Wales 235–47
 Vienna 285, 286
 Wakefield xxvii, 104
 Walney Island, Barrow-in-Furness
 86–7
 Walsall 104, 117–22
 Wapping, London 275
 Warsaw 177, 179
 Waverley Station, Edinburgh 251
 Wells 59
 West Bromwich 104
 West Riding xxii
 Westgate Centre, Oxford 200–1
 WestQuay, Southampton 70, 71
 Whitechapel, London 107
 Winchester 59
 Windsor 171
 Woolwich xlvi, xlviii–xlix, 4–5