

A DOOMED ESTATE

Of course, when at last I found the place, and saw it for the first time, it was a lovely day: bright sunshine picking out the details of the façade, and a light breeze making the forlorn little patches of daffodils dance ...

I did not arrive without prejudices. I had lived through the era of post-war comprehensive redevelopment and I had always hated it. Whole districts were compulsorily purchased and razed to the ground; the inhabitants were 'decanted', and airy new estates rose where their homes had been. There was always something very *de-haut-en-bas* about this process. The powers that be, it seemed, knew what was best and were prepared to impose it on their fellow citizens, who were expected to be grateful.¹

But it was not only the principle, but also the architectural style that I thought was wrong, obsessed as it seemed to be with rejecting anything that had gone before. Houses aligned with the roadway were to be avoided. 'Skyscrapers in a park', as proposed by Le Corbusier, were the fashion for a while; then we had long deck-access blocks, often with exposed concrete. Architects were, it seemed, either following or reacting to ideas coming from continental Europe. Large local-authority housing schemes gave them a chance to express their ideas on a grand scale, with a freedom that I think they would rarely have had when working for private clients. What the eventual inhabitants might actually *like* was hardly thought relevant: what did they know about architecture? If it was well designed in accordance with the best theoretical principles, it was assumed that they would like it when they lived in it.

I knew that estates built this way had suffered from crime and vandalism, and I wasn't really surprised. Much the most horrible example that I knew of was the (now demolished) Ferrier estate in Kidbrooke. I nearly burst into tears when, from a passing train, I first saw this dreadful place. It really was extraordinarily bleak, with the look of a prison camp or some kind of punishment barracks: long, grey concrete blocks with nothing to relieve the featureless uniformity. I could not understand how the architects could have condemned human beings to live in such a depressing place.²

My interest in Robin Hood Gardens was first aroused by an article in the *Big Issue*.³ The photos showed a grey concrete façade. I ought not to have liked it, but it looked somehow more interesting than Kidbrooke. It seemed that the estate had been designed by a pair of famous architects, Alison and Peter Smithson, who had written a great deal on the theory of building design and town planning but had built comparatively little. It had suffered

1 The wholesale sweeping away of the old was inspired by the *County of London Plan* of 1943, which recommended comprehensive redevelopment for those central areas which suffered from 'obsolescence, congestion, bomb damage and lack of repairs'. It was argued that the retention and refurbishment of those properties within the 'slum' areas that were in good condition 'would obstruct proper and economic redevelopment of the whole district, and would tend to lessen the advantages and amenities of the new dwellings'. See Hermione Hobhouse, 'Public Housing in Poplar', in *Survey of London: Volumes 43 and 44, Poplar, Blackwall and Isle of Dogs*, London County Council, 1994. Accessed at www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vols43-4/pp37-54, 17.4.2016.

2. On a subsequent visit, I was intrigued to see that the bleakness had been alleviated to some extent by the simple expedient of painting all the front doors in different bright colours.

3. Adam Forrest, 'How the Baby Boomers' Housing Dream went Bust' in *The Big Issue*, No. 1196, 14–20 March 2016

more than most from social problems, was poorly maintained and was apparently unpopular with residents. The local authority, Tower Hamlets, wanted to demolish; but there had been a campaign, instigated by the Twentieth Century Society and *Building Design* magazine, to preserve and refurbish it. However, not everyone, even among the architectural experts, agreed that the estate was worth saving. Bridget Cherry, writing in the influential Pevsner *Buildings of England* series, had called the estate 'ill-planned to the point of being inhumane'.⁴ The *Architect's Journal* favoured demolition, and English Heritage, when refusing to recommend listing, declared that Robin Hood Gardens 'fails as a place for human beings to live'.⁵

In the end, the campaign had been unsuccessful; the decision to demolish had been taken in 2012. But what I was not sure about from reading the *Big Issue* article was whether demolition had yet taken place. Internet resources were unclear about this. I was intrigued. Did Robin Hood Gardens still exist? The obvious course was to go and see.

Accordingly, one morning in March 2016 I broke my usual journey to work at Canning Town and got on the Docklands Light Railway, which because of its elevation gives a good view of the urban surroundings. With some excitement I looked out as we approached Blackwall station, and saw the estate: it was still there! Now I would be able to see if it was really as awful as some people had said.

Robin Hood Gardens lies between two busy roads, both of which produce almost continuous traffic noise: the northern approach to the Blackwall Tunnel on the East, and Cotton Street, the main access road to the Isle of Dogs, to the west. Two similar but not identical blocks curve to follow the line of these roads, almost in traditional fashion. In the large, roughly oval shape between them is an open space. The early pictures show this as bare grass, but it is now partially covered with bushes creating little private spaces. There is a moderately sized hill in the middle, which now has steps up one side; there are even informal patches of flowers, flourishing undisturbed. It is a lovely piece of unregarded *rus in urbe* and actually benefits from the policy of benign neglect that has clearly been in force for some time.

I entered this garden and climbed the hill to get a better view of the buildings themselves. I have to say that, contrary to all expectations, I fell in love with the place. The two long blocks, one of ten storeys and the other of seven, shelter the central garden from noise. The facades, consisting of repeating elements of pre-cast concrete, are given an intriguing vitality by the protruding vertical fins of varying lengths, which frustrated my attempt to find any pattern. Changes in direction in the gently-curving façades prevent any monotony: the effect is of variety within unity. The concrete itself is chipped in places – especially at the ends of some of the fins – which adds to the feeling of the place being somehow organic, like a time-worn country church.

I was surprised to find that four years after the decision to demolish, taken with the vigorous approval of the local MP and the chair of the tenants' and residents' association, many if not most of the flats were evidently still occupied. There were no signs of vandalism or graffiti, though plenty of neglect and lack of care. Inhabitants came and went: one was planting out

4. Bridget Cherry, Charles O'Brien and Nikolais Pevsner, London 5:East (The Buildings of England series), New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005.

5. Reference needed!

what I believe to be lettuces in one of the squares of soil attached to each of the ground-floor flats. All was peaceful. The whole effect reminded me of one of the larger courts in an Oxford or Cambridge College.

Why was the estate so hated by some? There have been criticisms of the internal layout, which I have not had the opportunity to assess. But mainly, I think, it is simply that people do not like living in barracks: there is perhaps not enough that is truly *homely* about the place which is, after all, meant to provide homes for people.

Nonetheless, I had the strange feeling that in its twilight, this estate was at last working as it was meant to. Perhaps it was simply ahead of its time, and perhaps that time had arrived at last! The estate could still provide homes, for those who were able to value and appreciate its particular beauty; or possibly accommodation for an artists' colony or an educational establishment.

Could it be saved, then, even at this eleventh hour? No, it is doomed. Contracts have been signed, and a redevelopment information 'shop' has been opened in the former estate office. The irony is that, for all its monumentality, Robin Hood Gardens is now overshadowed by much larger (and more vulgar) leviathans in neighbouring Canary Wharf and by the grossness of Tower Hamlets Town Hall, like some ghastly architectural Chelsea Tractor. And the proposed replacement buildings, probably in the newly fashionable 'blocky' style, will be even more substantial, with a far greater number of people per hectare and with a reduction in open space.

Peter Bavington, August 2015.

Postscript: I visited the estate again during 'London Open Day' 2016. At that time, we were told that the western block had been emptied of residents and scheduled for demolition in February 2017; the eastern block was in use as emergency accommodation. We were able to walk along the famous 'streets in the sky' which give access to the flats, and go into one of them. I have to say that although built to Parker Morris space standards, now considered quite generous, the flat did not seem spacious; and the balconies were mere slits without room to sit out: an opportunity lost, I thought, though the views of the garden were stunning. I noticed that people were using their balconies to dry washing – something else that added variety and interest to the exterior. We heard recorded accounts of life in Robin Hood Gardens: at least two former occupants described idyllic childhoods there, with the garden providing a safe space to play (and hide) always under observation from the windows of the flats above.

Robin Hood Gardens, like some rusty abandoned liner, had obviously suffered further neglect since my earlier visit. But demolition? At the time of writing this (June 2017) the estate is all still standing. It is as if it is refusing to die ...

A further postscript: The Western block has now (2018) been demolished. A section of it was preserved through the intervention of the Victoria and Albert Museum, where it will eventually join a display of house-fronts of various periods.