



Alison & Peter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens, London, 1972. View from the garden. © Aranzazu Melon, 2012.

## Robin Hood Gardens and the Rehabilitation of Post-War Mass Housing in London

BY ARANZAZU MELON

In London, in the context of a shortfall of homes that has achieved the status of “housing crisis”, the replacement of obsolete social housing stock, inherited from the post-war period of mass production, for housing that satisfies the demands of the private market and the need for more sustainable cities is one of the main issues for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Robin Hood Gardens’ demolition will become a paradigm for the positions to be taken respecting urban obsolescence. Across London, one can see examples that show how, by the criteria of contemporary urban planning, the domestic and urban potential of much of the post-war social housing stock makes it difficult for the current owner, the local government, to invest in its refurbishment and to keep its status as social housing.

It is the cycle of nature. Organisms utilize what is useful and discard what cannot be used anymore; blocking up the elimination of waste would destroy the community and life. In London, in the context of a shortfall of homes that has achieved the status of a “housing crisis”, it seems to be a natural urban phenomenon: the replacement of obsolete social housing stock, an inheritance of post-war mass production, by housing that satisfies the demands of an increasing population with a high financial capability. The obsolescence of post-war housing developments and the need for more sustainable cities is one of the main issues for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Robin Hood Gardens’ demolition in London will become a paradigm for the positions to be taken respecting urban obsolescence.

“The object suggests how it can be used, the user responds by using it well — the object improves; or it is used badly — the object is degraded, the dialogue ceases.”<sup>1</sup>

Robin Hood Gardens (1972) consists of two blocks of rental social housing in east London designed to accommodate 700 people in 214 flats. It was built by the British New Brutalism architects, Alison and Peter Smithson, on a lot constrained by heavy traffic near the City financial center, Canary Wharf and the London 2012 Olympic Park. The local council, responsible for the building for 40 years, announced the demolition of the uncared-for blocks in 2014 as part of a “new sustainable urban plan” to regenerate the zone.

The so-called *Blackwall Reach Regeneration Project* will see the building of 3,000 “new sustainable” houses and facilities for a new local community. Previously, the authorities argued that an investment of £70,000 per flat for the renovation would be too expensive and also declared that Robin Hood Gardens did not possess enough architectural quality to justify its conservation — the necessary listed status was never granted. An international campaign organized by the architectural magazine *Building Design* and supported by

such leading contemporary architects as Robert Venturi, Richard Meier, Richard Rogers and Zaha Hadid, pushed for the conservation of the buildings; not only did it not dissuade the authorities, but it also reaffirmed their demolition plans.

*If one looks beyond the present condition of the landscape and the buildings of Robin Hood Gardens, one can still see the original concept which combined a heroic scale with beautiful, human proportions. The juxtaposition of the repetitive window frames, the columns and the linear terraces creates a unique and powerful aesthetic. The location of the buildings around an elegant man-made mound creates a harmonious spacious enclosure, reminiscent of the great Georgian crescents and squares in Bath... Robin Hood Gardens has been appallingly neglected and from the beginning has been used as a sink estate to house those least capable of looking after themselves — much less their environment. It would be a real tragedy and a terrible mistake to demolish this important and extraordinary piece of modern architecture.*<sup>2</sup>

In 1963, Robin Hood Gardens had already been part of an urban renovation plan that involved the demolition of the existing, unhealthy 19<sup>th</sup> century terrace houses. So, paradoxically, the urban development logic about demolition/reconstruction of the urban residential fabric will repeat itself once again in this now desirable space. The new urban plan justifies the demolition of Robin Hood Gardens because it is in very bad condition as a result of a socially unsuccessful architecture despite its original good intentions to provide high-density housing and to accommodate the blocks in the urban fabric.

The project brief required solely residential use allowing a 350 persons/ha density. The two blocks acted as noise barriers against the traffic and were organized in a sort of stack



01 Alison & Peter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens, London, 1972; Erno Goldfinger, Balfour Tower, London, 1965. © Aranzazu Melon, 2012.



02 Alison & Peter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens, London, 1972. View from garden. © Aranzazu Melon, 2012.

up of streets/public space, the “streets in the sky” ideal concept imagined by the Smithsons. The planning also required the creation of a large green open space, unique in the area. In a context of post-war technical and material shortage in Britain, the buildings were built with a high-quality prefabricated concrete system and a central heating system was installed.

*At first sight, the wrecker resembles the saprophyte of the natural system, which reduces dead organisms to their simpler elements to speed the recycling of matter. But the likeness is only superficial. The saprophytes break an organization down into simpler compounds, in order to make use of the material and the energy released. Wreckers also break up old patterns, but they make little use of the energy released.<sup>3</sup>*

There are two different levels of obsolescence in housing. A technological obsolescence implies the modernization of elevators, thermal and acoustic insulation. A functional obsolescence involves improvements in room dimensions, distribution, orientation, building densities and mix of different uses with residential. Robin Hood Gardens’ obsolescence is principally technological but to its lack of suitable maintenance and energy inefficiency is added the problem of overcrowding in an isolated residential area surrounded by a very busy road network. Nevertheless, from a functional point of view, the 214 *maisonette* flats of the development have generous dimensions; they are well distributed, illuminated and ventilated. Why has this potential wasted away?

What remains and what is destroyed to re-do? Post-war social housing blocks are subject to formal technical-architectural-political diagnosis in order to make decisions to erase them from the urban fabric but often the type of obsolescence identified by the local authorities fails to recog-

nize and act over all the levels of social issues of communities with a high unemployment rate and low incomes living in urban areas occupied by the obsolete social blocks that have become desirable, decades after their construction.

The decisions taken over this type of building in London are highly influenced by the financial difficulties and the lack of interest by the current local authorities to refurbish the buildings in order to carry on maintaining an inherited 20<sup>th</sup> century Welfare State model that seems to be inefficient to satisfy the housing demands of the increasing population of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in London.

Through the Public Health Act of 1848, England became the first state to legislate the minimum standards of health and environmental quality, including a demand to improve the hygienic conditions of housing. After WW2, a social-democrat government achieved a Welfare State that built a large number of social rented housing over decades. Initially, the domestic conditions offered by the council housing were well thought of. The dwellings were designed to achieve decent living standards but the blocks were often built in isolated and residual urban spaces. In many cases, the residents that occupied them were problematic or had few resources and as time passed, post-occupation issues appeared.

Due to the high levels of crime rates registered in some of these developments, usually neglected by the local authority, public opinion grew that they favored the creation of unsafe urban areas. By the end of the 1960s, there was in Britain a general reaction against modern architecture and the so-called “urban redevelopment”. Conservation groups appeared to stand against the demolition of old Victorian buildings, to support the privatization and the renovation of large urban areas and to promote the renovation of buildings following a “neo-vernacular and semi-rural” model.



03 Alison & Peter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens, London, 1972. Garden façade view. © Aranzazu Melon, 2012.



04 Alison & Peter Smithson, Robin Hood Gardens, London, 1972. Detail of garden façade. © Aranzazu Melon, 2012.

All these tendencies increased later under conservative government policies.

Since the early 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's politics promoted a return to Victorian values and financial liberalism in a radical attempt to recover a British economy very deteriorated by post-war state interventionism. The previous decades of Welfare State investment were reduced mainly by the privatization of more than a half of council properties.

Social housing was the subject of a boycott in Britain: the "right to buy" conservative policy allowed social stock to become private property ruled by market laws; there was no more finance to build new developments; most of the existing stock was neglected by the local authorities with their lack of investment in urban quality, social management and technical maintenance. In London, it happened particularly around the Canary Wharf area and the old docks, where Robin Hood Gardens had been built decades before. As a result, more than one million social dwellings were eliminated in Britain during the 1980s, a decade of deep economic recession, high unemployment rates and social inequality in the country.

"The image idea is interesting, since from it arises the idea of knocking down. It is to the people who do not live there and to the council mayors to whom it is difficult to accept its presence."<sup>4</sup>

The French architects Druot, Lacaton and Vassal have practiced in the problematic Parisian suburbs in the search for a more efficient mass housing model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their study *Plus*<sup>5</sup> demonstrates that the necessary budget for demolition can be invested in a much more suitable way that can include an economic profit. Demolition is seen as a non-environmental option, regardless of how green the replacement building may be. They propose a constructive, typological and programatic renovation of the dysfunctional buildings from the inside out: partition walls and façades

are removed, lightweight structure balconies and winter gardens are added and transparent communal spaces are created on the ground floor. These technical changes can have the ability to transform the character of the neighborhood without displacing the established community living in the area for decades.

Across London, one can see examples that show how, by the criteria of contemporary urban planning, the domestic and urban potential of much of the post-war social housing makes it difficult for the current owner, the local government, to invest in its refurbishment and to keep its status as social housing.

The blocks are demolished and replaced or they are sold, refurbished and repositioned in the private, real-estate market. The existing residents are offered the opportunity to stay in the renovated developments as long as they can afford the new, *affordable* privately managed rental contracts, which in most cases leads them to move to other council flats further out of the city center. This way, the previously depressed area is re-activated and re-occupied with new residents with financial capabilities that satisfy the current private housing market needs. It is a conceptual reversal phenomenon.

Balfon Tower (1965) was built a few metres from Robin Hood Gardens and housed 146 rented social housing flats. It was designed by the Brutalist architect Ernő Goldfinger who built several post-war housing blocks across London, strongly influenced by Le Corbusier. Despite having technological obsolescence problems similar to those of Robin Hood Gardens, Balfon Tower was listed and sold later in 2011. The building's listed status prevented its elimination and later, an investment of £137,000 per flat for its rehabilitation implied its repositioning within the real estate market ruled by its own laws.



**05** Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, Barbican, London, 1965-1976. Willoughby House view.  
© Aranzazu Melon, 2012.



**06** Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, Barbican Frobisher Crescent view, London, 1965-1976. © Aranzazu Melon, 2008.



**07-08** Well Coates, Isokon Flats, Hamstead, London, 1934. View from Lawn Road and view from entrance courtyard. © Aranzazu Melon, 2014.



**09** Erno Goldfinger, Trellick Tower, Notting Hill, London, 1966-1972. Balconies detail.  
© Aranzazu Melon, 2014.



**10** Erno Goldfinger, Trellick Tower, Notting Hill, London, 1966-1972. View from Elkstone Road. © Aranzazu Melon, 2014.

Keeling House (1955) is a tower in east London comprising four blocks around a central service core. The 56 rented social *maisonette* flats designed by architect Denys Lasdun had post-occupation social issues and the tower was closed in 1992 due to structural problems. One year later, it became the first post-war housing block to gain Grade II listing. After the building's sale in 2001, a full renovation of the building was carried out and the flats became part of the high standard housing market in London.

Some other post-war housing developments have been a social success since their construction. The Barbican Estate (1965–1976) was built by the council architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon on a site in the city of London, devastated during WW2. The complex was developed in order to establish a permanent population both living and working in this central area of London. It was originally conceived to house 4,000 people in 2014 flats and became Grade II listed in 2001 following a designation as a site of special architectural interest for its scale, cohesion and the ambition of the project. It is one of London's principal examples of Brutalist architecture. With the “right to buy” 1980s conservative policy, the flats changed their original social status to its current high standard housing.

The case of the Isokon Building (1934) in west London is special as it was originally conceived as an innovative private block development with 36 affordable flats for young professionals. The building became social housing when the local government purchased it in 1972 and the Grade II listed designation was granted two years afterwards. It was designed by the architect Wells Coates to offer all the facilities to live and work in the building. The building was progressively deteriorating and eventually abandoned until its sale decades after. The building's renovation project in 2005 has won several renovation awards.

Trellick Tower (1966–1972) is another relevant post-war building in London: a 31-story tower housing 217 flats designed by the architect Ernő Goldfinger based on his previous design for the Balfron Tower. The problematic first residents created a bad reputation for the block soon after its first occupancy, and many flats stayed vacant for years. The “right to buy” policy allowed many tenants to become owners and a resident's association was created to improve security in the tower. The building was Grade II listed in 1998 and over the years has been re-evaluated into the London real estate market.

Where does the comparison to other London post war developments leave Robin Hood Gardens' demolition? Paradoxically, Trellick Tower — along with Robin Hood Gardens — had been voted by the viewers of British broadcaster, Thames Television, the worst modern buildings in London. This vote is just one of the times in which popular rejection was demonstrated towards Robin Hood Gardens. The image of the deterioration of its concrete structure, which has never been maintained, but is still structurally sound, is connected to a certain prejudice in British society towards the massive use of concrete in housing blocks, which seems to reflect a more industrial recent past.

The process of elimination of pathological post-war housing blocks involves also the segregation of population and the elimination of existing established social networks with a memory and a social conscience. The sustainability needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century will necessarily imply an environmental efficiency for the existing housing stock, and it can be an opportunity to restructure the construction sector, from an economic activity based on the production of new structures, towards an activity based on the re-use and transformation of the existing ones, producing habitability with low environmental impact.

The recycling of modern heritage, the social housing blocks built in the 1960s and 1970s represent a high potential to achieve the demands of a sustainable city when sustainable means: a better agreement with what already exists, the economical use of means, urban compactness, social connection and cohesion, adequate and varied mix of uses with residential, efficient and affordable public transport, good and varied community facilities, social, fair and affordable housing, suitable working spaces, and good and appropriate green public spaces. But this is not only a problem of architecture. ■

#### Notes

- 1 Alison & Peter Smithson, *Changing the Art of Inhabitation: Mies'pieces, Eames'Dreams, The Smithsons*, London, Munich, Artemis, 1994.
- 2 Richard Rogers, “Demolition Would be a Real Tragedy” — Letter to Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sports published in *Building Design* online, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2008: <http://www.bdonline.co.uk/demolition-would-be-a-%E2%80%9CReal-tragedy%E2%80%9D-says-rogers/3107632.article>.
- 3 Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away — An Exploration of Waste: What it is, How it Happens, Why we Fear it, How to do it Well*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2005.
- 4 Frédéric Druot, Anne Lacaton, Jean-Philippe Vassal, *Plus: Large Scale Housing Development, an Exceptional Case*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2007.
- 5 *Idem*.

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