

Review Article

The Ruins of the British Welfare State

Tahl Kaminer

In Owen Hatherley's tour of British cities, on which his recent book *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* is based,¹ the author reaches ex-steel city Sheffield. Here he encounters the Mancunian urban regeneration specialists, Urban Splash, presiding over a dubious project that perfectly embodies and represents the aporia of recent urban development, regeneration, and architecture in Britain and elsewhere: the regeneration of Park Hill, the notorious council housing slabs overlooking the city from their hill-top position, perched above Sheffield's main railway station.

The process Hatherley unfolds is fascinating, but his analysis of the material he assembles is lacking. Architecturally, Park Hill's regeneration destroys the ideas that animated the original architects, Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith (with Frederick Nicklin), such as 'truth to materials', or a simplicity that is about 'the man in the street' and the experiential. Socially and economically, it transfers council flats to the free market and replaces collectivity with individualism. [fig. 1] Historically, it annihilates the memory of the welfare state.

While Hatherley encounters the products of the work of Urban Splash on a number of occasions during his tour, it is useful to outline at this point the specific *process* of regeneration this cutting-edge developer initiated. An urban renewal project by Urban Splash typically begins with the demolition of the 'dullest' among postwar slabs in an area redlined for regeneration. Residents are driven off.

New buildings are built: cheap apartments, yet cool and smartly designed, tailored for the lower-middle class, a social group with limited choice regarding the purchase of property. As Nick Johnson, the current deputy chief executive and previous development director of Urban Splash, described it, the new buildings express 'a variety of architectural styles reflecting the city - a little bit messy here and there, because that's what cities are like, not standardised - with lots of colourful structures and water'.² This is accompanied by an investment in culture, either by organizing street parties or other events, in order to transform the image of the area in question by infusing it with vitality and vibrancy. Once a substantial number of lower-class residents have moved out, the lower-middle class moves in, and the image is improved through cultural content. After that, luxury housing, which offers the developers wider profit margins, is built. This process is, of course, gentrification: the banishing of the working class, the migrants, and the poor from areas with real-estate 'potential', and their replacement with a stronger social group.

The regeneration of Park Hill is marred by several contradictions. As much as it is a paradigmatic gentrification project of the 2000s, it is also an anomaly, because of its English Heritage listing in 1998. The listing, carried out despite vocal objections by Park Hill's antagonists, meant that the obliteration of the welfare state could not follow straightforward demolition procedures, as in the case of Robin Hood Gardens, and therefore had to take on a very

different form. Urban Splash had to figure out what aspects of Park Hill prevented its real-estate value from rising, and how to remove these 'nuisances' from the complex. Thus, the tensions are positioned within the project itself: between the demand, on the one hand, to conserve the listed council-housing complex, and, on the other hand, to increase its real-estate value by transforming it into something very different. Park Hill had to remain the same, yet it also had to change. The apparent conclusion was: that the more current residents were removed, the better; that the dour greyness of the concrete and grime-covered bricks had to be alleviated; that the monolithic aspect and horizontal repetition of the blocks needed some treatment; and, most visibly, that the robust heaviness and sobriety required some lightness and brightness. The solutions provided: the concrete frame, the skeleton of the original, was kept, the rest emptied; shiny, colourful aluminium panels replaced the sober brick wall infills; [fig. 2] the elevated streets were severed from the streets below; some additional height for lobbies added vertical features breaking the horizontality of the blocks; many council apartments became free-market apartments.

In the specific context of Britain in the 2000s, the Park Hill complex had few alternatives. As a listed building, it could have escaped demolition, but probably would not have undergone large-scale renovation, and would have been left to decay. City councils, unable to take loans since the Thatcher days, cannot carry out such projects without the involvement of private capital, and private capital, including both non-profit and for-profit developers, requires a means of financing projects. Hence, the necessity to substitute council housing with free-market apartments and to adjust the building accordingly. In this sense, Urban Splash's Park Hill endeavour can be considered both courageous and symptomatic: courageous because of the risk involved (there are, after all, safer ways for urban developers to make a profit), and symptomatic

because the only alternative for the listed complex was a slow death - a typical choice between two evils, or, rather, no choice at all.

The project therefore demonstrates the destruction of the welfare state - not just symbolically, but in a very concrete manner, by transforming council housing to free-market housing, hand in hand with a transformation of the architecture itself. It enables identifying specific elements of the architecture of the welfare state era that are no longer acceptable in a postindustrial, neoliberal order. It explains the relation of architecture to a political economy, a world view, an ideology, a specific society at a specific moment, unfolding the precise ideological differences between the 1950s and 2000s in Britain, and delineating the manner in which these ideological differences materialize in architectural design and built form.

Hatherley does not engage with these issues and questions, and avoids providing a thorough analysis. His visit to Park Hill is brief, and after lamenting the loss of the old housing complex, he swiftly moves on.³ *A Guide to the New Ruins* is a tour of British cities, emulating J. B. Priestley's classic *English Journey*. Born out of a commission by *Building Design* in 2009, its subject is architecture and urban development, and it includes some broader cultural, political and economic references, as well as personal anecdotes and memories. It includes many encounters with the remnants of the British welfare state. Hatherley adores these old relics of an era now receding from experience and sight. As an extension to his blog postings and a sequel of sorts to his previous *Militant Modernism*,⁴ Hatherley's book sharpens his polemics: his antagonists here are not so much neoclassicists such as Quinlan Terry and their patron, Prince Charles, or postmodernists, but the semi-official architecture of New Labour, which he terms 'pseudomodernism': an unimaginative, inferior, and, in its own specific way, also tacky architecture of



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: Interior photograph of a new apartment in regenerated Park Hill. Courtesy and copyright Peter Bennett, Urban Splash.

Fig. 2: View of Park Hill. Courtesy Isabelle Doucet.

white stucco, steel and glass. Within the context of the contentious and often vile debate in Britain about modern architecture, Hatherley's voice has been unique in its belligerent defence of the most despised of British modernist architecture. Here, he attacks the Faustian bargain of Richard Rogers and his allies with neoliberalism, a pact that produces the type of compromise the Park Hill regeneration project perfectly epitomizes: a modernism devoid of social content, reflected by the unimaginative, speculation-driven architectural design. While Hatherley produces the promised indictment of recent British architecture, the book is, at the end of the day, primarily a eulogy to the disappearing postwar architecture he so evidently loves. He discovers objects and environments that please him in unexpected places, such as the much disliked new town Milton Keynes, or in his own Southampton.

The chapter dedicated to Manchester stands out. By addressing culture, or, more specifically, popular music and the culture developed around it, Hatherley's rich tapestry manages to produce a story that relates architecture to the music of early 1980s Manchester in a manner that, despite being mostly associative and by no means 'tight', is nevertheless impressive. Here, Hatherley is at his best, tying the bridges and skywalks of Hulme's Brutalist Crescents to Joy Division's gloom and edginess. Many of his arguments, despite the romanticism lurking in their shadows, are sound. Hulme's devastated cityscape offered the kind of freedoms found in contemporary urban areas such as London's East End or New York's Williamsburg. While the relocation of students and artists to the latter areas eventually brought about gentrification, in the absence of real estate pressures in the late 1970s, Hulme's artist community was not implicated in such processes, at least not directly. However, regenerated Manchester did have its musical legacy - Factory Records, The Fall, the Smiths, the Hacienda, Madchester, Oasis - tattooed into the names of the streets, the buildings, the entire regenerated city and its collective

memory. Hatherley points out that there is no music being created in this regenerated city; the music that the city mythologizes took place in a very different setting, now destroyed by the new Manchester. Hatherley concludes: 'Hulme Crescents was one of the places where Modernist Manchester music was truly incubated and created, and its absence coincides almost perfectly with the absence of truly Modernist Mancunian pop culture.'⁵

The book is littered with smart and perceptive observations as well as misrepresentations.⁶ Apart from the excessive use of neologisms and the rather questionable genealogy he suggests for 'pseudomodernist' architecture,⁷ Hatherley succeeds in identifying the architectural consensus of the Blair era. Yet despite his best intentions, the book has difficulty in avoiding a slippage into an unproductive debate about taste, which does not go unnoticed by the author. With regard to a shopping mall in Southampton, he professes:

I don't like it, obviously, but the language that is used to attack it is remarkably similar to that which is used to attack some of the architecture I love. It's out of scale, it's too monumental, it's fortress-like, it's Not In Keeping, it leads to abrupt and shocking contrasts, it's too clean and too shiny [...].⁸

Hatherley frequently ridicules polemics in television programmes, newspaper articles or books that savaged postwar architecture 'in the name of the people', and cites residents' and former residents' approval of the same buildings.⁹ Consequently, one of the questions *A Guide to the New Ruins* raises is whether a 'public opinion' or 'public taste' actually exists, or whether it is, rather, manufactured. Was it indeed the public that turned against postwar modernism, or was it an opinion constructed by a conservative media masquerading as 'the voice of the people', in a manner similar to Prince Charles' rebuke of modernist 'carbuncles' supposedly at the behest of the public, but from the heights of British

monarchy? Ample evidence can be provided to corroborate and support each of these arguments, though it seems Hatherley believes the latter is the correct conclusion. Yet the author is also aware of the complexity of the question of taste. FAT's design for homes in Urban Splash's New Islington development was based on patterns found in a local resident's interior décor, but, as Hatherley points out, the resident replaced his tacky interior with Ikea furniture when moving into his new FAT-designed home - an ironic comment on the trickiness of the issue.¹⁰

Rather than focus on issues of style and taste, Hatherley attempts to relate architecture to society and politics in several manners, such as citing the specific social intentions of the architects of Park Hill, or identifying postmodernism with Thatcherism. Throughout the book, such a relation is mostly taken for granted; the argument is primarily delineated in the introduction, laid out in a confident manner, though with only limited rigour, avoiding an in-depth engagement. Here, Hatherley indicts New Labour's policies in the built environment as an 'attempt to transform the welfare state into a giant business'.¹¹ He identifies the specific policies and organizations involved in the effort, including the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), the Urban Task Force, Pathfinder, English Partnership, and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). He claims that bodies such as CABE 'enshrined in policy things which leftist architects like Rogers had been demanding throughout the Thatcher years - building was to be dense, in flats if need be, on "brownfield" i.e. ex-industrial land, to be "mixed tenure", and to be informed by "good design"'.¹² In other words, good intentions and what seemed to be decent ideas, ended up producing the 'pseudomodernist' cityscapes the author loathes. Pathfinder, as an instrument of gentrification, receives particularly scathing critique, and is called 'a programme of class cleansing'.¹³

So what went wrong? Did the problem begin with ideology? Was it caused by the complete subordination of urban development and regeneration to the logic of the free market? Or could it have been the fault of badly structured technocratic bodies and policies? And if the 'pseudomodernist' cityscape was produced primarily by the market, then why in tandem with New Labour and not earlier, under Thatcher? The different answers supplied by Hatherley are partial and incomplete. The overwhelming evidence he collects, as in the Park Hill case, is never completely parsed and analysed. The inferred conclusion is that the policies and programmes in question prioritized business interests at the expense of civic society and the welfare of society's weaker segments. But that is only part of the story.

The major shift at issue is the transition that began even before Thatcher's ascent to power: from industrial to postindustrial society, from Keynesian to neoliberal economic theories and policies, from welfare state to free market, from Fordism to post-Fordism. Hatherley, exclusively focused on British architecture and politics, avoids engaging this broad and general transformation. Yet approached in this manner, the scale and totality of the shift becomes perceptible. The aporia of Western cities in the 1960s and 70s was necessarily related to their de-industrialization, a process that already began in the 1920s and 30s with the relocation of factories and their skilled labour to suburbia, in line with the Fordist ideas of the time. This relocation, which commenced long before the general de-industrialization of the West, meant cities lost their role as the locus of industrial production and as regional centres. The solution offered by the new order emerging in the 1980s was in the form of international hubs hosting the headquarters of major multinationals, and bringing into the cities a new class of white-collar employees. These employees, in turn, had to invest long hours of work and were compensated via lifestyle options absent in subur-

bia but offered in gentrified neighbourhoods.¹⁴ This is, in a nutshell, the process in question, described in the most general sense. Landmark buildings, the mobilization of the 'creative industries', and the emphasis on the tertiary sector are all part of this story. Not all cities could follow the same path: in the contemporary neoliberal, postindustrial globalized condition, there is need for only a limited number of global hubs. The politicians' world view, and to some extent their specific ideology, is based on the consensus that emerged in the 1980s: free markets mean individual freedom, an argument trumpeted by Milton Friedman and adopted by Thatcher; the desires of the public can be satisfied via consumption in a free market, based on a belief in 'choice', however limited it may be in reality; individualism trumps collectivity; difference is a virtue, repetition and sameness a vice;¹⁵ class has supposedly been replaced by social groups defined by their cultural identities. These dictums are the outcome of a post-political era, in which economics were freed from the dictates of politics and society, and 'culture' replaced 'society' as the horizon, benefitting from the belief, argued already in the 1970s by the neoconservative Daniel Bell,¹⁶ that 'culture' can be understood as an area autonomous from political economy and thus open to diverse manipulations and desires, however idiosyncratic or perverse.

The very general and schematic explanation above does not, of course, account for the specificities of the new-built environment shaped by local contexts and considerations, nor does it explain why the 'pseudomodernist' architecture emerged in the 1990s and not already under Thatcher. Hatherley, focusing on the political aspect, claims Blair's government was neither a simple continuation of Thatcherism nor a return to 'Old Labour'. New Labour is characterized as the merging of the Thatcherist emphasis on the free market with a rhetoric of compassion and caring for the weaker classes, perhaps better described as a support of progressive culture, accompanied by a very limited

progressive social agenda, if at all. 'Pseudomodernism' is similarly a development of - 'Thatcherist' - postmodernism via deconstruction, emphasizing progressive aesthetics but voiding the progressive social content. The modernism salvaged - or deformed, according to Hatherley - by deconstruction and 'pseudomodernism' is specifically an aesthetic modernism - work that expresses the autonomy of the singular building as well as the architect's and client's creativity, rather than an attempt to merge city and building. This reflects the rise of the creative industries and their economic and symbolic importance in contemporary society, visible by the mid-1990s, the era of 'roll-out neoliberalism', but still under-developed and a second-tier sector in the 1980s, the era of Thatcher and 'roll-back neoliberalism'.

The policies of the current British government, which already announced the abolishment of strategic planning in its coalition agreement, will not reconcile Hatherley. But in the postpolitical age, a change in government is no recipe for finding a new trajectory for society; the governments' ability to steer society is limited. To satisfy Hatherley, and to reignite socially responsible architecture and urban development, what is needed is no less than a major shift in the political economy, a shift which contemporary politics are not delivering, but which the crowds in Barcelona, Athens, Tel Aviv, Santiago de Chile, and New York are loudly demanding.

Notes

1. Owen Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* (London: Verso, 2010).
2. Peter Hetherington, 'Manchester Unveils Plans for a Radically New Islington', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 17 September 2002, available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/sep/17/communities.arts?INTCMP=SRCH>> [accessed 30 November 2011].
3. More of Hatherley's opinion of the Park Hill regeneration can be read in Owen Hatherley, 'Regeneration? What's

Happening in Sheffield's Park Hill is Class Cleansing', *The Guardian*, Wednesday 28 September 2011, available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/sep/28/sheffield-park-hill-class-cleansing?INTCMP=SRCH>> [accessed 30 November 2011].

4. Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (London: Zero Books, 2009), and <<http://nastybrutalistandshort.blogspot.com>> [accessed 29 November 2011].
5. Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, p. 131.
6. For examples of misrepresentations, see the attribution of the coining of the term 'urban renaissance' to Ricky Burdett and Anne Power or Richard Rogers in the late 1990s (p. xxx), whereas it was actually borrowed from the United States 1980s; or the claim that 'Charles Jencks's *Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, meanwhile, turned to full-blown neoclassicism' (p. xxv). In contrast, Hatherley demonstrates his observational powers when identifying the mediating role of deconstruction between postmodernist architecture and the architecture he calls 'pseudomodernism' (pp. xxvi-xxvii), by pointing out that 'the Situationist critique of postwar urbanism has curdled into an alibi for its gentrification' (p. 117); or, in another instance, claiming that '[t]he idea that a city should exist for youth and "vibrancy" is a tired combination of baby-boomer nostalgia and romantic guff about the virtues of poverty's dirt and noise, a superannuated idea that is amenable to knock-it-up-cheap developers as are developers' cul-de-sacs' (p. 62).
7. Picking up the thread of an American discourse, he uses the term 'Googie', relating to a crass, commercial, though also frivolous and sometimes witty American modernism in which he identifies the forefather of 'pseudomodernism'. In some cases, Hatherley certainly has an argument, whether referring to the most blatantly commercial architecture of recent times or the individual development of Frank Gehry or Morphosis via an interest in a Californian vernacular to the 'high-aesthetic' of the Vitra Museum and later work. But such a genealogy, beyond its usefulness in undermining the claim to high culture of the architectural stars, is not easily extended to explain the Jean Nouvels, the Daniel Libeskind, the Zaha Hadids, the Herzog & de

Meurons, the Sejimas, or the Peter Zumthors. A sharp angle, an idiosyncratic corner, a weird materialization found both in the American commercial 'vernacular' modernism and in a work by Hadid, can indeed be linked associatively, but fall short of solid proof. A more intricate argument can be found in Owen Hatherley, 'No Rococo Palace for Buster Keaton: Americanism (and Technology, Advertising, Socialism) in Weimar Architecture', available at <http://themeasurestaken.blogspot.com/> [accessed 18 October 2011]. Hatherley's previous book, *Militant Modernism*, explored this territory and attempted to differentiate between an aesthetic and a social modernism.

8. Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, p. 41.
9. See, for example, Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, pp. 99, 129.
10. Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, p. 145.
11. Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, p. x.
12. Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, p. xiv.
13. Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, p. xvii.
14. Peter Marcuse, 'Do Cities Have a Future?', in Robert Chery (ed.), *The Imperiled Economy: Through the Safety Net* (New York: Union of Radical Political Economists, 1988), pp. 189-200.
15. Hatherley correctly underlines the fact that, at the end of the day, the emphasis on difference has resulted in repetition. He writes: 'How do you react to something which already tries incredibly hard not to offend the eye, or respond critically to an alienated landscape which bends over backwards not to alienate, with its jolly rhetoric, its "fun" colour, its "organic" materials?' (p. 156).
16. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* [1976] (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

Biography

Tahl Kaminer is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Architecture, TU Delft. Routledge recently published his PhD dissertation as *Architecture, Crisis and Resuscitation: The Reproduction of Post-Fordism in Late-Twentieth-Century Architecture*. He is a co-founder of the journal *Footprint*, and edited the volumes *Urban Asymmetries* (010, 2011), *Houses in Transformation* (NAi, 2008), and *Critical Tools* (Lettre Voilee, forthcoming).

