

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Jessie Brennan, *Regeneration! Conversations, Drawings, Archives & Photographs from Robin Hood Gardens*, London: Silent Grid, 2015. ISBN: 9780993023118 (paper)

That “Brutalism is back” is now a tired cliché. There are countless online “hot takes”, glossy magazine features, and coffee table photography books extolling the beauty of brutalist buildings that stand as examples of “heroic” architecture among the near homogeneous platitudes of post-modern, composite-clad monoliths. Some of the more striking brutalist housing projects such as the Balfron Tower in Tower Hamlets, the Trellick Tower in Kensal Town, and Park Hill estate in Sheffield are being redefined by property developers as “desirable” places to live, and being “beautified” to create accommodation more befitting of the incoming creative and financial class seeking alternative, hip and “cool” places to live.

The difference between whether a brutalist housing project stands or falls seems to be matter of heritage listing, because while these brutalist housing estates remain standing, others fall. Places such as the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle and Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar have succumbed to demolition protocols; with the former now all but replaced with the gleaming “yuppidromes” (Hatherley 2014) of Elephant Park, and the latter currently lying in a state of purgatory, awaiting the imminent wrecking ball.

Listed or not, the brutalist *ethics* of these buildings are being admonished, either by cleansing the estate of council and social tenants (i.e. the urban poor), or by outright demolition. It is these ethics that I have championed in my recent academic paper on Brutalism (Mould 2016), but in *Regeneration! Conversations, Drawings, Archives & Photographs*, Jessie Brennan has curated a wonderful collection of texts, photos, and artistic endeavours about Robin Hood Gardens that articulates these ethics far more artfully.

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She has crafted this set of evocative essays, sketches, photographs, and interviews into a wonderfully tactile artefact, one that captures the political dimensions of Robin Hood Gardens' brutalist architecture. The original kernel of Brutalism's ethics was extolled by Reyner Banham in 1955:

[Brutalism]...exclude[s] formality as a basic quality if it is to cover future developments and should more properly read: 1. Memorability as an Image; 2. Clear exhibition of Structure; and 3. Valuation of Materials "as found".
(Banham 2011:28)

The book itself could be considered an extension of this ethical triumvirate in that its very materiality is memorable, clearly exhibited, and has a haptic rawness that evokes the very brutalist environment it so wonderfully details. Upon receiving the book, I was instantly taken aback by the "roughness" of the design; it is small and malleable, but at the same time, totally unlike other books in that it has no spine cover (just the bare binding glue), no dust jacket, and no publication details page (given that it was a self-published title by Brennan). These factors alone evidence its raw and "as found" materiality, rendering it a brutalist artefact even before considering the content.

But diving into that content, its most obviously important utility is that it collects many of the important visual histories of the site in the archive section. The architectural drawings, old photographs, "Householders Manual"; collectively they give an overview of the Smithsons' intentions of "monumentally" social housing, and how it was envisioned.¹ Brennan stresses that much of the previous work on Robin Hood Gardens has "tended to ignore, and a worst misrepresent, the experiences of the

1 For more on Banham, Brutalism, and Alison and Peter Smithson, see Figure 2 below and <https://www.architecture.com/Explore/ArchitecturalStyles/Brutalism.aspx> (last accessed 6 January 2017).

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people who have come to know the building most intimately” (p.18), and that *Regeneration!* “attempts to address that imbalance...by exploring with residents the qualities of lived-in brutalism and the personal impacts of redevelopment”. So far more than visualising the building’s architecture, the book (and the archives, photography, and interview sections in particular) showcases the lives of the buildings’ inhabitants.

The main artistic piece of this “book” is the four drawings, entitled “A Fall of Ordinairiness and Light” (Figure 1 below shows two of these drawings). They are striking in their narrative, almost as much as they are amazing in their aesthetic detail. The four-stage crumpling of the building by hand-made pencil drawings evocatively represents the impending demolition, all the while enlivening the details of inhabitation. The essay by writer and researcher Richard Martin (p.38-42) neatly encapsulates the metaphorical and representational minutiae of Brennan’s drawings, arguing that they “disrupt modernist assumptions concerning development, both photographic and architectural, with the conventional journey towards light and progress giving way to a graphite scene evoking demolition and dynamite” (p.39). They add a material “weightiness” to the book; the fact that you have to pull them out, unfold them, flip them over to see the sequences forces you to interact with the content. Much like brutalist buildings themselves invite the user/inhabitant to interact with it on multiple levels (socially, personally, psychologically, affectively), Brennan has produced a literary-cum-artistic artefact that reproduces the ethical triumvirate of brutalism as articulated by Banham all those years ago.

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Figure 1

Such material engagement is further evidenced by “Conversation Pieces”, a series of drawings of doormats. Again, through the relatively simple medium of pencil drawings, Brennan has articulated the inhabitation of the monumental. Through the simplicity of a doormat, one senses the welcoming nature of Robin Hood Gardens as home (or perhaps as a multiplicity of home sites), but also the personable adaptations people have made, together espousing the “monumental sociality” of the site. The frayed edges captured on the drawings speak to the well-used condition, and the differing mosaics and patterns and inflections allude to the vibrant multiculturalism that the housing estate once had.

It is in the interviews that Brennan has collected where the direct stories of inhabitation come to the fore. Former residents and the caretaker have been given the

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opportunity to tell their own stories of life at Robin Hood Gardens, how it changed over time, and what the current demolition plans mean more broadly for London, gentrification, and urban capitalism. While the opinions differ, what is not in any doubt is a fondness for the community spirit the estate offered. Its provision for children's activities, social cohesion, even the soundproofing of the flats; there is a real affection for Robin Hood Gardens within these conversations. One of the most interesting interviews is with a former tenant, Abdul Kalam (p.64-67), who recalls with great fondness life on the estate, but also how rumours quickly spread of the site's precariousness, and how that led to people not investing in their homes. The eventual "failure" of Robin Hood Gardens therefore is argued to have come about through strategic disinvestment by the council, forcing the decline of sociality and community spirit. However, in one of the most redolent passages in the whole book, Kalam argues (and in the spirit of the book's "as-found" materiality, I have taken a photo of the quote rather than retype it):

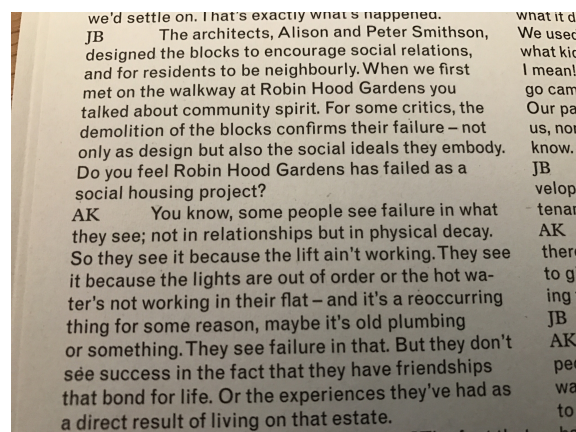


Figure 2

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This sentiment eloquently sums up the problems of estate regeneration within current neoliberal urban discourse. If it is not measurable, it does not factor into the decision making process; and the “community spirit” and joy of inhabitation that the interviews give us a snapshot of are prime examples of the kind of qualitative experiences that are sadly omitted from many of the policy documents, council reports, and online op-eds that justify the demolition of Robin Hood Gardens.

To label *Regeneration!* a book would be a disservice to its artistic and material qualities. Brennan has curated a collection of texts, drawings, conversations, photos, and artefacts that emanate the brutalist ethics of Robin Hood Gardens so powerfully. Of course there could have been more; more photos that evidenced the nuance of daily life, more interviews, more of the architectural drawings. But its punchy narrative, both textual and visual, has an impact as visceral and imposing as many brutalist structures have themselves. To wallow in detail and nuance for the sake of aesthetic or academic gratification would be to dilute or even deny these quite masterful brutalist qualities.

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