

A swansong for Robin Hood Gardens

23 October, 2015 By Flora Neville

Jessie Brennan's book *'Regeneration!'* is a sensitive understanding of the Alison and Peter Smithson-designed estate

It's a buzz word, 'regeneration', and unlike its slightly spiky friend 'redevelopment' it has positive connotations - of birth and growth and hope and glory. It is supposedly enabling. The exclamation mark in the title of artist Jessie Brennan's book *Regeneration!* says it all.

Regeneration! is the result of months that Brennan spent in conversation with residents of the celebrated but doomed east London council estate Robin Hood Gardens, taking rubbings of their doormats, and drawing and photographing the Brutalist blocks. Her work is collated in a beautifully produced book with two (slightly incongruous) essays by Richard Martin and Owen Hatherley. It's not that the essays aren't interesting and enlightening, but the intellectual perspective detracts from the project's central intimacy, its deliberate simplicity and ordinariness.

There is nothing intellectual or self-consciously artistic about Brennan's artwork. Her approach is, as one resident at the book launch put it, 'subtle and very human'. The intimacy that her work creates is without doubt what is most powerful, most poignant, and most authentic about the project. The broad aim was simple: to unpick the 'myth' that regeneration is wholly good for everyone; that it deserves a celebratory exclamation mark.

Crumpling paper is a very evocative way of presenting demolition

A Fall of Ordinariness and Light is a series of four meticulous, graphite drawings of four photographs of the seven-storey block on the western side of the estate. Ordinary signs of ordinary life are everywhere - radios in windows, washing on the line, a bike behind the railings. Each photograph was printed, then crumpled to different degrees, and then sketched, so the drawings are studies of the photographs, and each crease is detailed.

Crumpling paper is a very evocative way of presenting demolition; as if knocking down a place where people live ordinary lives is as easy as scrunching up a piece of paper and tossing it in a bin. Each drawing is named after what Brennan calls the 'Orwellian' subtitles of Compulsory Purchase orders: The Order Land, The Scheme, The Enabling Power and The Justification.

Brennan's efforts are a celebration of ordinariness, and this was recognised by the same resident at the book launch. 'The fall of ordinariness. Right,' said Nicholas Ruddock, a retired tenant of Robin Hood Gardens since 1982. 'This is a very ordinary block. It's a brutal block, but it's not that brutal because if you're living inside it, you're looking out. You come out of your front door, and there are some children, possibly playing, or the rain's coming, pouring down. These tactile, these daily things are what need to be cherished, need to be understood and not over-intellectualised. I'm sorry, I think I've said enough.'

Regeneration! Conversations, Drawings, Archives and Photographs from Robin Hood Gardens, by Jessie Brennan with contributions from Richard Martin and Owen Hatherley - 78pp - Silent Grid - £14.99.