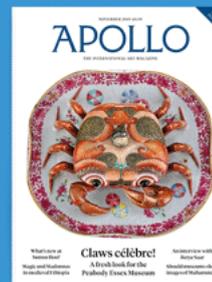
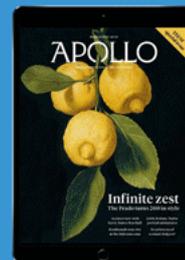




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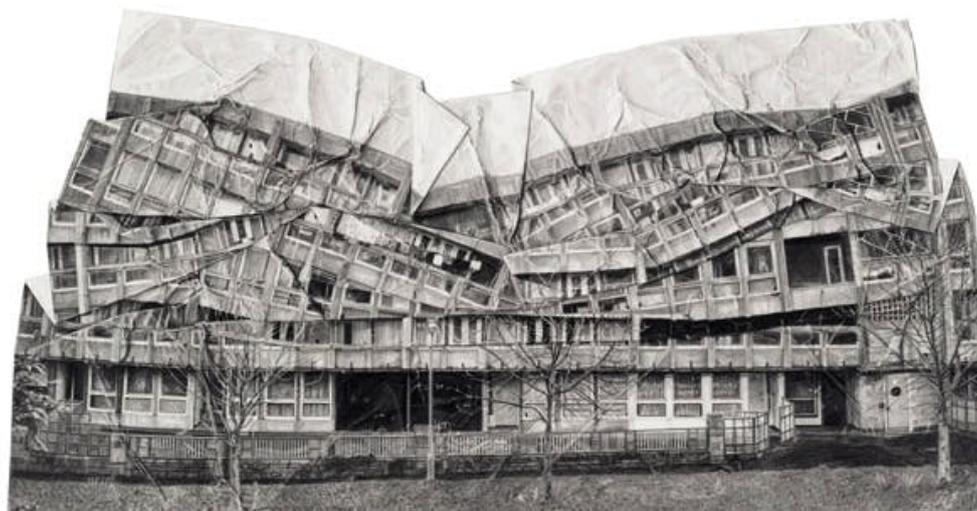
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ARCHITECTURE COMMENT

Robin Hood Gardens and the politics of regeneration

Jessie Brennan

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A Fall of Ordinarity and Light, The Enabling Power (2014), Jessie Brennan. Commissioned for 'Progress' by the Foundling Museum

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Much has been said and written about Robin Hood Gardens, and the latest news – [that a review of the decision not to list the buildings was declined](#) – will ignite more discussion yet. However, debates around the estate’s perceived architectural successes and social failures have often focused only on the buildings – on the need for their preservation or demolition, depending on your point of view – rather than the feelings of people living within the blocks. They have tended to ignore, and at worst misrepresent, the experiences of the people who know the buildings most intimately.

My project, *Regeneration!*, attempts to address that imbalance in a small but meaningful way by exploring with residents the qualities of a lived-in brutalism and the personal impacts of redevelopment. It began as a series of recorded interviews with long- and short-term tenants, developed out of the process of making doormat rubbings – a starting point for engaging conversations. The book brings these together along with architectural plans and archive images, two series of drawings, a set of photographs by former tenant Abdul Kalam, and two essays. [Owen Hatherley](#)’s text charts the political decisions that led to the rise and fall of Robin Hood Gardens: [Richard Martin](#)’s essay contextualises the project through an analysis of my artwork *A Fall of Ordinarity and Light* and proposes a broader set of questions around the politics of regeneration.

Of course, it’s the politics that makes Robin Hood Gardens so fascinating and important. The estate’s proximity to Canary Wharf, and the relentless march of development across London’s East End outwards, is why, in part, the estate cannot be allowed to exist. Robin Hood Gardens appears squatting, both literally and figuratively, below the glinting towers of Britain’s newest financial centre, an impostor on the neoliberal landscape.



Conversation Pieces no. 34 (2014), Jessie Brennan. Commissioned by HS Projects 2014-15

When I asked Abdul (who grew up and lived on the estate until 2012) how he felt about the demolition, his response was telling. He told me:

‘When boys sit down, or when mates sit down, what we say is, they are

basically driving the poor people out. That's what they're doing. In the most simple of forms. It's not racism, it's more about wealth. We don't want you here 'cause you don't belong here any more [...] If we had a deep conversation that's what we'd settle on. That's exactly what's happened.'^[1]

That the estate in question is brutalist adds another layer of contention. When the blocks were built in the late 1960s, New Brutalism had become a key architectural expression of the welfare state and today Robin Hood Gardens embodies those socialist ideals of progress. The planned demolition – now almost a certainty – doesn't merely sweep away an entire social housing estate, it threatens to crush those collective dreams.

The decision by Historic England not to recommend at least a review of the listing question reflects the political context for regeneration today – one that firmly values entrepreneurial charities and a subsidised private sector over state-funded and administered housing. More than ever, Robin Hood Gardens carries the symbolic weight of political struggle under which the buildings will imminently collapse.

A book launch for *Regeneration!* will be hosted at [RIBA Bookshop](#) on Tuesday 6 October 2015. For further information please [contact RIBA Bookshop](#) or visit the [artist's website](#).

Regeneration! is commissioned by HS Projects and supported by Insight Community Arts Programme, 2014–15.

^[1] Abdul Kalam, interviewed by Jessie Brennan, London, 15 November 2014

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