

Social housing in ruins: Heritage, identity and the spectral remains of the housing crisis

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Abstract

This article explores a recent acquisition by the Victoria and Albert Museum in the context of the current housing crisis. The exhibit is a fragment of a recently demolished social housing estate, Robin Hood Gardens in East London. The museum, which hails the acquisition as a significant example of the Brutalist movement in architecture, frames the exhibit both as a means of conserving a piece of architectural heritage and as a means of engaging the public in discussion about the future of housing. Yet it cannot be separated from its previous function as a home to several thousand residents before the estate was demolished as part of the area's 'regeneration'. This article therefore seeks to explore the contested memory of the estate in the context of today's housing crisis, and how the exhibit illuminates wider questions of class identity, spectacle and how we define the heritage of the built environment. It will consider a potential defence of the exhibit as ethically motivated by a desire to protect the 'unofficial heritage' of the estate, before going on to argue that it ultimately fails in this regard, serving only to aestheticize the act of displacement.

Keywords

Social housing, ruins, heritage, identity, housing crisis

Introduction

Amidst the global housing crisis, home is fast becoming a site of intense political contestation. No longer confined to the domestic sphere (if it ever was), home has now been placed firmly into the public sphere with political parties, media outlets, scholars, artists and concerned citizens everywhere voicing outrage at a myriad of housing failures. Whether we focus on the shortage of affordable housing, gentrification and the displacement of 'native' city-dwellers, large-scale demolition and urban development, skyrocketing rents or evictions

and homelessness, housing is now firmly on the public agenda. In this article, which deals specifically with the heritage of social housing in relation to a new exhibit at the V&A museum in London, I will argue that the latter is emerging as a significant object of collective memory, especially in a context of housing crisis.

Furthermore, this memory is being sharply contested: between a conception of social housing as architectural heritage—a de-politicized, aesthetic understanding—and a conception of social housing which foregrounds the intangible aspects of heritage: social housing as *home* and anchor of identity. Whereas the former consigns social housing to the past, the latter understands it as an object of political efficacy and negotiation of identity in the present and future. To elucidate the ways in which social housing has entered the realm of collective memory, it is first necessary to outline the context of the UK housing crisis. This has, in conjunction with a legacy of Thatcherite Conservatism, redefined housing as an individual financial asset rather than societal responsibility. After understanding the reasons behind the loss in social housing stock, we can then begin to interrogate the ways in which this loss is being reckoned with as both an object of architectural heritage and a site of working-class memory.

The origins of social housing

Social housing originated in the 19th century as a means of improving the living conditions of labourers. However, it was only after the First World War that the construction of social housing began on a truly significant scale (Garrett et al., 2020). “Homes fit for heroes”, as Lloyd George described them, would provide homes of a standard deserved by returning servicemen and act as a justification for clearing extant slums. The ambitious Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919 aimed to deliver 500,000 homes within three years—though for economic reasons, only 213,000 homes were built (Greed, 2014). Nevertheless, the act signalled the beginning of the national provision of social housing that went on well into the 20th century.

Implemented in a period of great national optimism, social housing was seen as exciting, with visionary young architects at the helm of ambitious, state-sponsored programmes to provide decent and affordable housing for all. To live in a ‘council house’ was seen as respectable, with estates mainly housing the working poor and middle class in a mix of tenures (Hanley, 2007). These houses were seen as modern, futuristic and a sign of progress. They were, in short, seen as a status symbol. Yet, by around the 1980s, council housing had gained a reputation for crime, dirt and poverty. No longer seen as aspirational, they were increasingly described as traps, with architecture that in many cases meant to foster communal living but instead proved hard to police and therefore encouraged criminal behaviour (Coleman, 1990). When Thatcher came to power, her brand of Neoliberal ideology increasingly constructed housing as an *individual* problem with market-based solutions. Her conservative government preached the virtues of home ownership over renting, leading to her now infamous ‘right to buy’ policy. Those who could afford to buy moved onwards and upwards, out of estates, mostly leaving behind the most economically

deprived individuals in society. Councils no longer received financial support from central government to build new housing stock or adequately maintain their existing stock, allowing social housing to fall into a severe state of disrepair on the one hand and a shrinking pool of housing with which to fill ever growing waiting lists on the other.

These, then, are the conditions which have made the current housing crisis all but inevitable. With dwindling budgets for state-building programmes, local municipal authorities everywhere find themselves unable to invest in public housing on the scale of their post-war predecessors. With waiting lists for social housing which far outstrip demand, vulnerable people are routinely housed in substandard conditions or made homeless. Social housing itself is allowed to fall into a such a deteriorated state of material disrepair that demolition is often seen as a more profitable solution than renovation, while newly 'regenerated' homes are often unaffordable for those who wish to remain in the area (Campkin, 2013). Newly gentrified neighbourhoods mark the replacement of generations of working-class families—families increasingly stigmatized on television, in film, and in political rhetoric as morally inferior and criminal (Wacquant, 2007). In short, the systematic neglect of publicly owned housing stock has meant the symbolic and material displacement of lower income communities from their homes in gentrifying areas to distant and frequently poor quality alternatives elsewhere, far from family, economic opportunities and other community ties (Slater, 2011).

Social housing as 'heritage'

In response to this symbolic and material displacement, we see housing, and particularly social housing, become a sorely contested and highly visible site of social action, performance, and resistance. Due to its architectural legacy, social housing is increasingly being drawn into discussions on heritage (Moss, 2016), and is, I would argue, entering the realm of cultural memory. Yet this memory refuses to be consigned to the historical past, occupying an unsettling temporality in which its material remains linger and take on extra potency in the context of the current housing crisis and the systematic dismantling of the welfare state. In a similar vein, Owen Hatherly has argued that 'Brutalism is not so much ruined as dormant, derelict—still functioning even in a drastically badly treated fashion, and as such is ready to be recharged and reactivated' (2009, p. 42). I would argue that evidence of this 'reactivation' can be seen in a range of memory work, which both reflects on the material remains of social housing as an object of cultural heritage and anchor of collective identity and uses it as a site for political debate in the present. Unsurprisingly this has proven to be controversial, with several different, and perhaps contradictory, understandings of heritage emerging. Is it a nostalgia for the built environment and the architectural aesthetics of the Brutalist movement? Or is it a conception of heritage which aims to bring the legacy of our contemporary past into the present (and future)? In other words, is it a historically delimited, object-oriented conception of heritage, or can it privilege the intangible heritage of home, identity, community and memory, values which are increasingly in need of foregrounding in the context of the severe housing crisis? A comprehensive treatment of these questions demands far more scope than this article allows. But I will attempt to

demonstrate how they are being played out on a small scale by focusing on a single example: the acquisition of a fragment from Robin Hood Gardens, the recently demolished housing estate in East London, by the Victoria and Albert Museum. This fragment was taken to the Venice Biennale for exhibition in 2018, which the author traveled to see and on which the research for this paper was partly based. However, the paper will deal primarily with the politics of exhibition raised by the exhibit and not the contents of the exhibit itself. It should also be noted that the exhibit itself is divided into two phases: the temporary biennale show, and the permanent East London installation which is not yet on display. This paper will focus on the former, using it to engage with questions of collective memory, the concept of heritage and the politics of identity.

Robin Hood Gardens: from utopian dream to a 'failed place to live'

Robin Hood Gardens, which has been described as a seminal piece of Brutalist architecture, was built between 1968-72 and designed by the architects Alison and Peter Smithson. With 214 flats, the estate was designed to house 689 residents and split into two slab blocks enclosing a tranquil, green space to block out noise from surrounding traffic (Moss, 2016; Powers, 2010). This space was a defining feature of the estate and centered around a striking mound created from the rubble of the former site: the demolished Grosvenor Buildings. In addition to acting as a memorial to the former site, the mound provided a place to relax and for children to play, inspired by the popular 'land art' movement as well as eighteenth century landscaping practices (Powers, 2010). For the Smithsons, architecture and social values were deeply entwined; as Nicholas Thoburn puts it, theirs was an architecture in which 'aesthetic form courses with social relations' (Thoburn, 2018, p. 617). The Smithsons were strongly committed to the social ideals of housing and urban development, arguing that 'the task of our generation is plain – we must re-identify man with his house, his community, his city' (Smithson, 1970, p. 18). They advocated connection between people and their environment, and the meaningful relationships that communal, street-feel spaces could engender. Considered to be the first practitioners of Reyner Banham's 'New Brutalism'—characterized by 'formal legibility of plan; clear exhibition of structure; valuation of materials for their inherent 'as found' qualities; and clear exhibition of services'—they are said to have 'recover[ered] in Modern form the structure of traditional working class living' (Banham, cited in Mould, 2016, p. 703; Moss, 2016, p. 242).

Borne out of a dissatisfaction with Modernist architecture, brutalism was much more than an architectural style. It was more properly an 'architectural ethic' (Mould, 2016) or what Thoburn (2018) describes as 'class architecture': a practice which 'faces up to social relations, critically handling them in built form' (Thoburn, 2018, p. 617). Brutalism was about functionalism in the service of people, buildings 'ready for dressing by the art of inhabitation' as opposed to prioritising beauty and thought to be 'immersed in everyday life' (Van den Heuvel et. al., 2004, p. 19; Hatherly, 2009, p. 36). It proudly showcased its 'found' materials and industrial scale in the service of its civic ambitions, and was absolutely unconcerned with conventional aesthetic norms. Its use of concrete, which many saw as bleak and intimidating,

Figure 1

Robin Hood
Gardens, 2008.
Source: Photograph
courtesy of
Steve Cadman



was specifically about embracing a kind of ‘anti-beauty’. Most importantly, Brutalism is what Mould (2016) calls a ‘relational’ architecture; its extreme form demands our ethical and political attention in that:

it forces people to partake in the architecture itself more so than any other form; it encourages people to take notice of their surroundings and to engage in (sub)conscious decision making processes as to how they will receive and act in the building... It invites an active participation rather than a passive reception of it (Mould, 2016, p. 8).

Relational architecture is designed to champion the communal and shun the privatisation of domestic space. Robin Hood Gardens was built with this commitment to sociality and communality in mind, hence the importance of the green space in the middle of the estate arranged so that neighbours could watch each other’s children. Homes were open to the light, providing an openness that muddled distinctions between public and private (Thoburn, 2018). Its elevated walkways, known as ‘streets in the sky’, facilitated pedestrian access and helped to deter crime with its clear line of sight. Most importantly, they encouraged interaction, creating places to rest and opportunities for personalisation (Mould, 2016). Much more than a method of access, these street decks were primarily meant to function as social spaces, reflecting the Smithsons’ commitment to ‘the building as street’ (Eisenman, 2004 cited in Risselada, 2011).

Yet its light, open spaces and emphasis on communal living could not stem the tide of public opinion against housing estates. By 1984, Robin Hood Gardens had been voted one of the worst buildings in Britain (Moss, 2016). People thought its Brutalist architecture ugly, while professionals argued that it fell short of its symbolic aspirations for community living. Brutalism, and its reliance on concrete, became synonymous with decline, and to this day the idea that design is responsible for behaviour prevails (Coleman, 1990; Macdonald, 2015). Helena Webster described Robin Hood Gardens as a place which ‘failed human habitation’ and that its ‘combination of... hard concrete aesthetic together with its fortress like structure alienated the scheme from its context, in effect forming a ghetto of housing for the lower classes’ (Webster, 1991 cited in Moss, 2016, p. 250). Others described it as ‘disastrous [...] a hotbed of crime’, ‘inhumane’ and an ‘archetypal example of the failures of modernism’

(Moss, 2016, p. 250). Vandalism and rubbish were familiar sights at the complex, and critics argued that despite its utopian visions, design could not solve the social problems which plagued the estate. In a revealing statement, Maxwell remarked that ‘if architecture did not have to carry the whole responsibility, this could still be an inspiring place to live, but only if living there is not to be stamped with the label of belonging to a deprived class’ (Maxwell, 1994 cited in Moss, 2016, p. 252). This equation of council housing living with deprivation shows how council housing has increasingly come to signify moral, aesthetic and economic failure.

What can heritage do?

Despite its terrible press, several high-profile architects campaigned to have the building listed on the national heritage register. This would not only have protected the material fabric of the building, but would have conferred on it considerable symbolic status. As Moss argues, ‘[...]there is a direct relationship between the effect of listing something as heritage and its perceived significance and importance to society’ (2013, p. 12). As both an authorising discourse and a set of practices, heritage is a reconstruction of the past in the present and includes the identification, mapping, display, interpretation, management and conservation of that which is deemed to be culturally significant. As a regulatory discourse under the remit of ‘experts’, heritage is able to constitute and regulate certain forms of social knowledge, including knowledge about spatial identities. Material objects connect us with our shared past, bestowing a sense of shared identity and belonging.

In the case of Robin Hood Gardens, its numerous campaigns for protection by listing must be seen in a context of urban development, or ‘regeneration’. The estate sits a stone’s throw away from London’s financial district in Canary Wharf, and was identified in 2007 as a promising site for more expensive new homes (Blackwall Reach Report, 2007). 3000 new homes were originally proposed as part of the Blackwall Reach Regeneration Project (later revised downward to 1500) and the building lost its repeated campaigns for listed heritage status. The proposal cited poor structure, inadequate community facilities and poorly maintained open spaces, arguing that the cost of bringing the estate’s homes up to a suitable standard would cost the local council £20m—which it couldn’t afford (Moss, 2016). The C20 society, which campaigns for the safeguarding of Modernist architecture, challenged the decision, arguing that the building should be listed as it was home to a ‘flourishing community in individual units of decent size and with magnificent views’ and with ‘no significant problems with vandalism or antisocial behaviour’ (Wright, 2013: n.pag.). They argued that

If it goes ahead, the demolition of Robin Hood Gardens will seem as inexplicable and misguided to future generations as the demolition of the Euston Arch does to us today. It’s a major work by architects of international stature. If it was not standing on such an incredibly valuable site, so close to Canary Wharf, refurbishment would be the obvious solution, preserving both the historically significant architecture, and an established community (C20 website, 2015).

Figure 2

The demolition of Robin Hood Gardens, 2017.
Source: Photograph courtesy of Tom Oliver Payne.



This snapshot clearly shows the ways in which heritage can be used to confer or deny both material protection and symbolic prestige on the built environment. In the case of Robin Hood Gardens, this protection was denied despite arguments for both its social and architectural value. Furthermore, the decision to erase rather than refurbish the building exists in conjunction with a symbolic stigmatisation of working-class space which cannot be ignored. If ‘social circumstances rather than design quality are still what decides whether a building lives or dies’ as Hugh Pearman (1993, p. 6) argues, then Robin Hood Gardens was killed by a combination of material neglect and symbolic demonisation which made it easy to rationalize its erasure and attract a more affluent kind of resident (Campkin, 2013).

Robin Hood Gardens at the V&A: The Working Class Home as ‘Artefact’

It was in this context that the Victoria and Albert Museum was able to acquire its recent artefact for exhibition: a three-story section of the estate containing a complete exterior and interior of a maisonette flat in addition to salvaged objects. The exhibit, which was secured and purchased from Swan (who are delivering the £300 million Blackwall Reach regeneration project described above), exactly reproduces the effect of walking into a finished flat. So why, despite its failure to win official heritage protection, did the museum feel it was an important acquisition? Dr Neil Bingham, Curator of Contemporary Architectural Collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum, argues that: ‘Robin Hood Gardens is an internationally recognized building by Alison and Peter Smithson, the protagonists and intellectual leaders of the Brutalist movement’ (Swan website, n.d.) and that ‘this three-storey section of Robin Hood Gardens [...] is [...] worth preserving for future generations’ (Townsend, 2017). The Project Director for Blackwall Reach at Swan stated the following: ‘At Swan we [...] acknowledge the importance of cataloguing and celebrating the diverse and vibrant

architecture of the Capital [and] we have been able to ensure that a part of Robin Hood Gardens will remain in a public collection for future generations' (Swan website, n.d.). The curators of the exhibit also express a desire for the fragment to serve as a means of 'raising awareness' of the current state of social housing as well as 'working towards solutions' for the future (Thorpe, 2018). Christopher Turner, for example, argues that 'Estates like Robin Hood Gardens are amazing architectural achievements' and that the curators were 'really interested in unpacking that and using that as a lens to look to the future of social housing' (Mair, 2018). Olivia Horsfall-Turner, a co-curator, corroborates this when she argues that 'Out of the ruins of Robin Hood Gardens, we want to look again at the Smithson's original ideals and ask how they can inform and inspire current thinking about social housing' (Mair, 2018).

Robin Hood Gardens and the spectral remains of the housing crisis

These statements clearly show a recognition of the architectural value of Robin Hood Gardens, despite its failure to win official heritage protection. Indeed, by operating beyond the bounds of 'official' (state sanctioned) heritage discourse, the exhibit might be seen as a performance of what Rodney Harrison calls 'unofficial heritage'—a form of social action and a recognition of cultural value bestowed on previously forgotten objects (Harrison, 2013). Much like 'official' heritage, 'unofficial' heritage acts to confer socio-symbolic value on the past in the present (though often the two are mingled in practice, with 'unofficial' heritage borrowing practices from official heritage, for example). As Harrison explains:

Unofficial heritage may manifest in the rather conventional form of buildings or objects that have significance to individuals or communities, but are not recognised by the state as heritage through legislative protection, or may manifest in less tangible ways as sets of social practices that surround more tangible forms of both official and unofficial heritage (Harrison, 2013, p.15).

In the case of Robin Hood Gardens, the staging of a neglected building as a valuable piece of architectural heritage by an institution as prestigious as the Victoria and Albert Museum shows a willingness to operate beyond the bounds of official, state-sanctioned heritage discourse- and in this sense, could be seen as an example of Harrison's 'unofficial' heritage. As with all forms of heritage, the temporality of the exhibit is multidirectional. By looking simultaneously to the past and present, both the pastness of the material fragment as a piece of architectural history and the use of that past in the present are highlighted—in this case, as a material prompt for the discussion of the current housing crisis and its future solutions. This desire to put the fragment to work in the present could be seen as an example of what Victor Buchli calls the 'archaeology of us': a potentially ethical act of 'presencing that which was absent', 'bringing forward... that which is excessive, forgotten, or concealed' and 'enfranchising it as an object of social discourse' (Buchli & Lucas, 2001, p. 15, 171, 174). This is an archaeology which deals with the detritus of our contemporary past—our present. Though carefully preserved, we are reminded of the artefact's former status as waste object, which reminds us of our own complicity in the absent present. The fragment acts as a spectral

trace, the uncanny double that cannot be assimilated. We can interpret it as an attempt to make visible that which would have been forgotten, to ponder and care for ‘what remains’. These remains act as a material prompt to reflect on the absent present, an absence in which we are all implicated (Buchli & Lucas, 2001).

This ‘presencing’ can also act as a means of negotiating value and identity in the present (Smith, 2006). The salvage of a building denied official protection shows the ways in which heritage meanings are subject to negotiation, and that while heritage can be used to exclude groups by official institutions who foreground a nationalising consensus version of history, it can also be used to challenge the status quo and mediate social change as well as passively reflect it. As Smith (2006, p. 4) argues, ‘heritage may also be a resource that is used to challenge and redefine received values and identities’. If heritage can enable a more inclusive articulation of identity, then perhaps the staging of Robin Hood Gardens in this manner can act as a form of recognition for social housing and the communities who live there. If museums are elite cultural sites in which identities are forged and negotiated (Karp & Lavine, 1991), then the exhibit is perfectly placed to draw attention to spatial identities of social housing, and the ways in which official heritage practices undervalue particular objects and people. As Robert Maxwell argues, ‘if we now feel that buildings showing such defects are worth preserving, it is not to economize on their replacement, but to recognise their value... as part of a historical and cultural development that is crucial to our own identity, and in some instances, as an embodiment of values that make them part of an artistic and spiritual heritage’ (1998, preface, cited in Moss, 2016). More than just a celebration of architectural style, the exhibit is clearly intended to paint social housing as a significant aspect of British identity and a means of investing ourselves in a shared future in which social housing is seen as an important social and cultural asset.

Objects retain a deeply affective hold over us (and are, moreover, essential means of constructing intangible elements of both home and identity). We engage with the world through objects; these objects can be seen as a means of enfranchising Robin Hood Gardens and by extension, those who live in social housing all over the country today. The journalist Christopher Beanland’s remark is also interesting; he comments that ‘it’s not wrong to be inspired by architecture, to display it—it’s better than nothing’ (Sayer, 2017). Though crudely put, his remark does force us to reflect on what the alternatives to conservation would have been in this case. Finally, there has been widespread debate in recent architectural scholarship about the importance of foregrounding the ways in which buildings are not just constructed, but their ‘afterlives’ and deterioration as well (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014). Christopher Turner, of the V&A’s architecture and digital department, agrees that ‘demolition... is as much a part of architecture as construction and I guess needs to be learnt about in museums’ (Sayer, 2017). These arguments about the inevitable flux of architecture recall the prophetic remarks made by the Smithsons in their own 1976 Venice Biennale exhibit. The exhibit, which consisted of a bench based on the facade of Robin Hood Gardens along with a photograph of the estate, was accompanied by a catalog entry with the following words: ‘A building under assembly is a ruin in reverse’ (Smithson and Smithson cited in Eds: Lichtenstein & Schregenberger, 2001, p.142). It seems fitting, then, that the V&A exhibit at the 2018

biennale should carry the same name. In earlier writings and in the same vein the Smithsons argued that ‘buildings should be thought of from the beginning as fragments: as containing within themselves a capacity to act with other buildings and be themselves links’ (Smithson and Smithson cited in eds: Lichtenstein & Schregenberger 2001, p.142). Seen in this context, the exhibit could itself be read as a link between past visions of social ideals in built form and the present impoverishment of those ideals. The fragment, rescued from ruin, ‘acts with’ its regenerated substitute to issue us with an ethical injunction: to question its newfound status as ‘heritage’, and to ponder how that heritage relates to marginalized identities in the present.

Critique

This defence of the exhibit is deeply problematic, however. For even if we acknowledge the desire to preserve the *architectural* legacy of the building, it is far from clear that this could lead to effective engagement with the *current housing crisis*. Although the statements made above demonstrate a desire to preserve the material fabric of Robin Hood Gardens and to use this as a way of ‘raising awareness’, they ultimately reveal an attitude that lays the exhibit open to two serious criticisms. Firstly, the exhibit is presented as ‘an important example of 1) Brutalist *architecture*’, deflecting from the fact that not only was it once a home, but a home lost in painful circumstances. The exhibit neatly preserves a fragment of the rubble, but potentially ends up sanitising its painful origins behind the veil of architectural aesthetics. Furthermore, in foregrounding a material *object*, the exhibit potentially deflects from more intangible elements of heritage such as home and identity. Secondly, it entrenches a long-term pattern of aestheticising and othering the working class, a trend of stigmatisation which was in part responsible for the building’s erasure. Both criticisms, if justified, greatly undermine the ability of the exhibit to play an active role in effecting social and political change in the context of today’s housing crisis. I will deal with these two criticisms in detail, arguing that the significance of the second critique means that the first could never adequately be resolved. If the exhibit were to engage with the politics of stigma and neglect which led to the building’s demolition (and to existence of the artefact on display), the museum would first have to acknowledge its own complicity in the process.

Home as architectural history

Firstly, the framing of the exhibit as a piece of architectural *history* divorces itself from the painful circumstances of its acquisition: the demolition of a *home*. More than almost any other kind of space, the erasure of home represents a particularly traumatic loss both on a personal and collective scale, and there is a deeply ingrained understanding of home as a primordial, universal and sacred symbolic space (Bachelard, 1969; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Cieraad, 2006). The focus on the fragment’s past as a piece of *architectural* history rather than its eventual destruction in a wider context of urban regeneration means that only a neatly manicured and lifeless version of the past is able to come to the fore. The erasure of this particular building, to which the fragment being exhibited owes its existence, was a result of

intentional destruction—what some authors have referred to as the severely traumatic experience of ‘domicide’ (Porteous & Smith, 2001). This fragment was not just found: it was taken from the rubble of a painful, political decision to obliterate the home of hundreds of residents. By privileging architectural aesthetics, the exhibit can be argued to be strangely divorced from its painful origins, concealing its own traumatic beginnings under the mask of architectural history.

Rather than reflecting on its past as a stigmatized space with a history of neglect for the pursuit of private profit, we receive a sanitized snapshot of an architectural movement. The act of conservation sterilizes the disorder of rubble, taming the unpleasant remains of the past. As Shanks argues, ‘The excremental culture of archaeology, which may wish to avoid the nausea of loss and an absent past, finds gratification in a purifying, perhaps neurotic desire to hold on and to order’ (1992, p. 75). We might also wish to question an exclusively tangible, material understanding of ‘heritage’. As Smith (2006) argues, heritage is not just a ‘thing’ but a process or an experience. This seems particularly apt in the case of the home, which concerns not only the historically delimited, architectural object but a whole series of human attachments and affective qualities. A purely material understanding of home as reducible to its physical shell would seem to be an impoverished version of heritage indeed.

The other as spectacle: the museum as complicit in the aestheticization of displacement

Secondly, the privileging of architectural aesthetics over the social relations that brought the ‘artefact’ into existence opens it to the charge of aestheticising the suffering of the working classes. This aestheticization renders the fragment as little more than a spectacle for the museum-going elite. As spaces where the interpretation of heritage takes place, museums play an important role in creating and conveying a sense of identity. Karp and Levine argue that:

What is at stake for struggles for control over objects and the modes of exhibiting them, finally, is the articulation of identity. Exhibitions represent identity, either directly through assertion, or indirectly, through implication. When cultural “others” are implicated, exhibitions tell us who we are, and perhaps most significant, who we are not. Exhibitions are privileged arenas for presenting images of ‘self’ and ‘other’ (1991, p. 15).

All museum exhibits have a moral dimension. They are never neutral, but possess subtle power dynamics, which come together as a result of the interplay between producers, display, and visitors (Michael Baxandall, quoted in Karp & Levine, 1991). As western cultural institutions built on a history of colonialism and exploitation, ‘the only story such objects can tell is the history of their status as trophies of imperial conquest’ (Baxandall, 1991, p. 16). The exhibit, which travelled first to the Venice Biennale, can be seen in this context as a trophy—the ‘spoils of war’—and as such, an act of extreme symbolic violence. Historian Stephen Pritchard echoes this sentiment when he remarks that ‘the V&A’s purchase of a part of Robin Hood Gardens is the fetishisation of working-class ways of living. It’s also an act

of poverty tourism [...] It is an act literally of accumulation by dispossession' (Pritchard cited in Singh, 2018). The architectural critic Owen Hatherly was equally scathing, writing that 'this sounds like people salvaging from tragedy to create a working-class theme park'(Hatherly cited in Sayer, 2017). Yet Tristram Hunt, the director of the V&A and a former Labour party politician, has responded to criticisms of insensitivity by denying the politically charged nature of collecting and exhibition. Writing in *The Art Newspaper*, he argues that the museum is not a space of activism, but simply a 'neutral' collector:

Behind this critique is the increasingly popular conviction that not only can museums not be neutral sites, but that they also have a duty to be vehicles for social justice [...] I see the role of the museum not as a political force, but as a civic exchange: curating shared space for unsafe ideas. And in an era of absolutist, righteous identity politics, these places for pluralism are more important than ever (cited in Ravenscroft, 2018).

Olivia Horsfall-Turner, a co-creator of the exhibit, remarked similarly that 'the museum is not a campaigning organisation, it's an institution that collects and invites people to think about the objects in the collection' (cited in Ravenscroft, 2018). Yet museums are never 'neutral' spaces, and neither are the objects collected there or the ways in which they are acquired, exhibited, narrated and interpreted. If all we are actually doing is admiring pieces of rubble for aesthetic enjoyment, are we not complicit in compounding the crisis further? Is this not simply a display of elite nostalgia (literally, the longing for a 'lost home') at the expense of less fortunate *others*? After all, we are relatively untouched by the suffering to which we are but passive bystanders; in many ways, looking is the opposite of acting (Sontag, 2004).

This second point feeds into long-term narratives of spatial stigma, especially in relation to social housing estates. Council estates are heavily classed spaces, burdened by symbolic spatial stigmas excluding their inhabitants as marginal, undesirable and undeserving of a place in the public sphere (Mackenzie, 2015). As Lynsey Hanley (2007) argues, the term 'council estate' summons up a raft of negative associations: laziness, dirt, crime and poverty. According to Lees (2014, p. 924) it plays 'a symbolic and ideological role as a signifier of a spatially concentrated, dysfunctional underclass'. Countless television shows portray estates as gritty, claustrophobic and dangerous, and their residents as ignorant and lazy. Numerous headlines in national newspapers describe estates in highly charged language, as 'social concentration camps' (Dugan, 2009) and 'riddled with crime' (Little, 2014). Politicians including Tony Blair and David Cameron have associated council estates with failure, labelling them as 'gift[s] to drug dealers and criminals' and 'no-hope areas'(Blair cited in Boffey, 2016; Cameron cited in Kelly, 2007). In short, they are framed as traps which make the spiral into a life of drugs, crime and poverty almost inevitable (Nwonka, 2017). This widespread and systematic stigmatisation of social housing not only erodes sentiments of shared responsibility for lower-income communities, but makes it all too easy to exclude them altogether through 'regeneration'. With material degradation seen to correlate with moral failure, council estates no longer represent the future; they are instead represented as a symbol of failure in the public imagination, a failure which has led in the case of many estates to total erasure (Campkin, 2013). As Wilkinson (cited in Mould, 2016) explains,

‘Brutalist buildings are still regularly voted the most hated buildings in Britain in popular polls. This public disdain translates into political disdain, which translates into demolitions’. According to the Chartered Institute of Housing, the number of social housing units between 2012 and 2020 has fallen across the country by around 210,000. In London, the situation is particularly acute: social housing supply has plummeted from 11,374 in 2011/12 to a mere 632 in 2019/20.

Heritage, identity and the politics of the present

Both shortcomings, if justified, have the same impact: they risk depoliticising the exhibit and dramatically muting its potential for social efficacy in the present. In highlighting such a narrow and purely aesthetic aspect of the building’s past—an ‘example of brutalist architecture’—without addressing painful histories of stigmatisation and destruction, ‘the use of the past to challenge and rewrite cultural and social meaning in the present becomes more difficult’ (Smith, 2006, p. 29). If the two criticisms above are to be taken seriously, then the exhibit ends up masquerading as an object from the past while refusing to acknowledge the politics of the present that put it there. The housing crisis, which has partly come about due to the widespread stigmatisation of social housing, remains at a distance, undisturbed. We view the suffering of displacement from a comfortable distance, celebrating architectural value and tacitly acknowledging the housing crisis without taking meaningful action. This unwillingness to address working class spatial stigmatisation and its symbolic and material erasure from urban space has direct consequences for the present debate on social housing. To be invested in the present, we would need to imagine that the object on display was a part of it, as well as a signifier of a shared future. But by relegating it to a historically delimited architectural period—Brutalism—the object remains just that: an object from the past. By remaining silent about histories of spatial stigma, the exhibit risks being strangely irrelevant and remote from the *social*, rather than architectural, features of social housing. Instead of allowing absent others to speak, it silences them. The exhibition ends up demonstrating a nostalgia for architectural form devoid of the social relations which once made that form meaningful.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to contribute to research on heritage, identity and social housing, using the V&A Venice Biennale exhibit of a recently demolished section of Robin Hood Gardens as an example. I began by arguing that social housing has become increasingly embedded within the concept of ‘heritage’ due to the ongoing privatisation, regeneration and erasure of existing Brutalist housing stock, and that the politics of this relationship ought to be further explored. Because of this interdependence, how we understand ‘heritage’ with regard to social housing is key. My findings suggest that how we define the term has implications for whether it operates in practice as an inclusive or exclusionary framework for imagining and negotiating urban spatial identities. In particular, the need for heritage to retain an ‘intangible’ aspect is crucial, so that the people affected by heritage and regeneration

policies are placed front and centre, for example by cultural institutions such as museums who may seek to influence narratives on what counts as heritage, or promote certain modes of display. Furthermore, a focus on the communities who inhabit this heritage emphasizes the *social* aspect of social housing, linking the collective memory of architecture to the social visions which inspired it in the first place. This is particularly important in the context of an ongoing social housing crisis, where spatial stigma and the politics of spectacle often play leading roles in determining who has a right to the city. In a period of ongoing property speculation and the embrace of ‘regeneration’ by policymakers and developers, issues of heritage and collective memory must be taken beyond the domain of architectural history and placed firmly in the present.

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