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'Art and the City'

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Introduction

The second half of the Twentieth Century saw massive change in the style and design of social housing, which in turn affected the way cities operated dramatically. By fashioning public housing after skyscrapers, tower blocks were created in an effort to find more efficient ways of using space. Despite their altruistic origins in overseas designs by Le Corbusier however, the tower block has become recognised as a symbol of crime, poverty, the breadline, and dystopia in general. The most common stories you hear about these monoliths dotting England involve death, abandonment, and drug abuse, amongst other subjects. It is interesting, then, that the art community seems – at the very least - divided on the worth of these buildings.

This essay is split into four subsections and traces the origins of towers blocks and the varied responses to these buildings. *Development* explores origins of contemporary social housing in architects Le Corbusier and Erno Goldfinger, two of the premier figures in the creation of tower blocks. Moving beyond these two figures, *Reaction* investigates the effects of their ideas and the responses by various artists over the past several decades. These responses have, as mentioned before, been mixed and divided; Stephen Willats, for instance, has revealed how these changes in housing affected our lives. *Rebellion* investigates the Situationists and Constant, who expressed utter loathing for Le Corbusier's work and created their own ideas of the city. Finally, *Futurology* looks at Archigram and Peter Cook, who actively embraced aspects of modern living and sought to develop it in a hi-tech, futuristic manner. Because of the importance of the tower block and its new idea of social housing in relation to the responses from other artists, *Development* will be our first stop.

Whilst presenting an unbiased and balanced view of social housing and the varied reactions to it, the conclusion of this essay will draw a line on how well the arguments for and against social housing are put across.

Development

Le Corbusier is the undeniable pioneer of the tower block design. Before 1945, he had experimented with various ideas for housing, and he had also been interested in the concept of garden cities. This system of planning created self-contained and self-sustaining cities, featuring equal and divided amounts of industrial, residential, and commercial areas, providing all the elements needed for a city. Le Corbusier himself adapted the garden city for the modern day with his 'Ville Radieuse', which delved into deeper specifics than the initial concept, but in 1945, he developed the first of what he described as 'vertical garden cities'.

The Unite D'Habitation at Marseilles, the 'prototype' for Le Corbusier's design, included a vast variety of commodities and resources made available to the working class man. The Unite features '337 apartments of 23 different types... 5 superimposed internal streets... a shopping street for provisions with a delivery service... a restaurant, tea room and snack bar... a newsagent, pharmacy and book shop... a nursery and kindergarten with roof garden and paddling pool specifically for children... and a roof terrace with hanging garden, gymnasium, solarium and 300 meter running track' (in Frampton 2001: 157). As with the garden city, Le Corbusier provided the necessary elements for a modern man; He was also a follower of the

Soviet idea of ‘don kommuna’ or communal housing, which was to generate a new kind of society via the interweaving of housing units. The Unite D’Habitation, then, was a social experiment on a grand scale, with both Le Corbusier’s interlocking homes and the variety of services in the building offering various social interactions.



Unite D’Habitation, Marseilles
Le Corbusier, 1952
‘Raw’ Concrete/Béton Brut

The Unite was hardly the most attractive building, but it was highly functional in both its placement and design, which allowed maximum light at all times within its carefully designed homes. Le Corbusier also had a strong grasp of modern materials, with techniques commonly employed in holding bridges aloft raising the building above the ground and thusly not obstructing the public. Modern techniques also allowed Le Corbusier to envision his homes as being slotted into the building pre-made and fully formed – an image made literal with an illustration featuring one of the finished homes being placed into the concrete frame by some disembodied hand. These ideas of prefabricated homes influenced tower blocks where every single unit fit the same specification, and these were to become common in the years following the development of the Marseilles Unit.

Erno Goldfinger worked in an England whose government had begun to demand high rise housing. In the Second World War, it was estimated that over four million homes had been destroyed, and the 1956 Housing Act encouraged the construction of a building with more than five floors. Goldfinger capitalised on this in making one of his most prominent designs, Balfron Tower. Perpetually in the shadow of its later-developed twin, Trelick Tower, Balfron was no less formidable, at twenty-seven stories and a hundred and forty six homes. Despite the uncompromising and intimidating Brutalist style of the building, the tower was created with comfort in mind. Sensible design saw the lift shaft, laundries and rubbish chutes confined to their own tower, away from where the noise and activity could cause bother for residents.

Each home was designed with space in mind, and was surprisingly functional compared to the standard flats would become known for. Doors slid as opposed to opening outwards, and the homes were constructed to allow the maximum amount of light in. Balconies featured within each home, and the higher floors offered an appealing view of London.

Both men's visions were to be hindered by outside influences beyond their control. In working for the state and in one case, a '*private cooperative of labourers and foremen*' (Gans 1987: 101), Le Corbusier proved that his utopian housing had appeal with the working class, yet on the other hand, he was forced to contend with smaller budgets and constrictions with each successive Unite. The Unite built for the private cooperative in Nantes-Reze lacked many of the decorative aspects displayed in that of the Marseilles Unite. Berlin's Unite was distorted badly so by various factors that it was quickly disavowed, and Briey-en-Foret's Unite was constructed with what he considered sub-par materials. All three are considered substandard to the Marseilles prototype. Goldfinger's greatest trial was to overcome the perception of the people who would have to live in his buildings. In England, the perception of tower block living was already dim, and Goldfinger and his wife spent two months living in Belfron Tower to prove it was safe. Before Goldfinger could complete Trelick Tower however, the 1968 Ronan Point disaster occurred. An explosion destroyed one entire corner section of the two-hundred foot tower from top to bottom, and subsequent investigation found that quality in the tower's construction was severely lacking.



Balfour Tower, London
Erno Goldfinger, 1967
Concrete, Timber and Asphalt

Even without this disaster, Goldfinger might not have fared much better. Trelick Tower, upon completion, became a buzzword for negative aspects of high rise living.

Both Balfour and Trelick are popular places to live today, but high-rise living never caught on as strongly as it could have, even in the art world.

Reaction

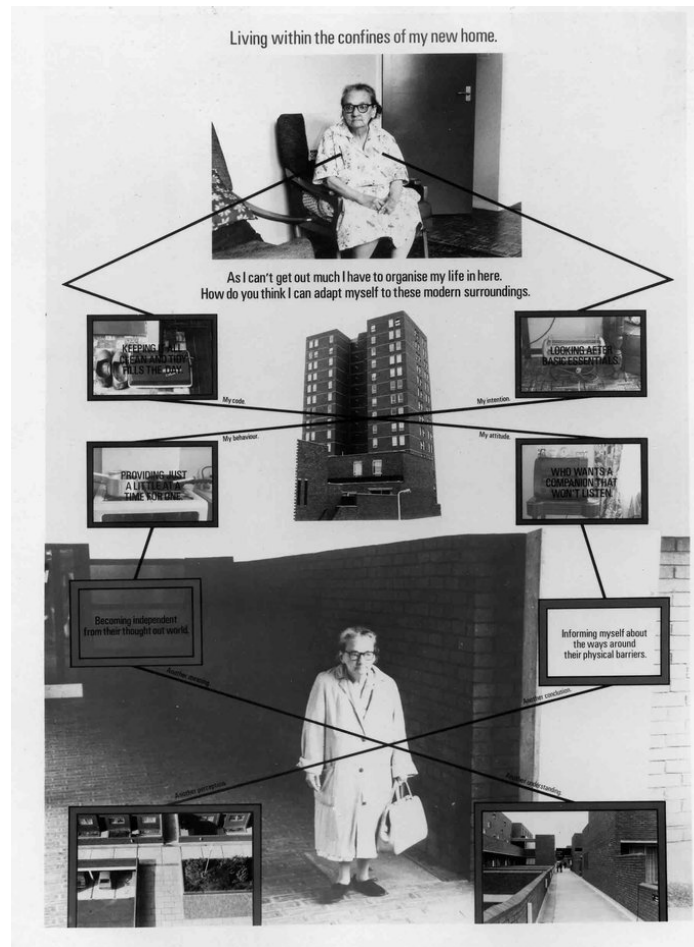
Even as tower blocks were being constructed in the Nineteen-Fifties, artists were generating reactions. Many focused on the aesthetics of the tower block and the council-mandated interiors, such as Catherine Bertola, who relied specifically on the embossed wallpaper used in many flats to create 'If Walls Could Talk'.



'If Walls Could Talk' (detail)
Catherine Bertola, 2002
Found Wallpaper in Tower Block Flat

Whilst others used the tower block visually, Stephen Willats focused specifically on how this new way of living affected the people within. 'Les Problemes de la Nouvelle Realite' focuses on the tower blocks of Bagnolet, Paris, and is a relatively simple set of images akin to a flow chart; we see a family or couple, have their residence pointed out to us within the tower block, and are presented with a problem or issue that arises from their current style of living; However, rather than outright blame the tower block for these problems, Willats instead treats it as a symbol, describing it as a '*externalisation of authoritative parameters*' (Willats 1979: 30) and '*the symbol of the problems and effects caused by authoritative structures within modern society*' (Willats 1979: 30). Willats suggests that the problem is not with the tower block itself,

but more the government and local authority that create them. This was somewhat accurate, since rather than follow Le Corbusier's attempt at a social experiment, local authorities were content to dump the poor and lower classes into tower blocks, which only furthered issues people would have with their governing body. 'Les Problemes de la Nouvelle Realite', however, is a little limited in its focus on a set of groups, yet it is complimented by Willats' further work on the subject.



'Living With Practical Realities' – Panel 3
Stephen Willats, 1978
Photographs, Letraset, gouache and ink on card
109 x 76cm

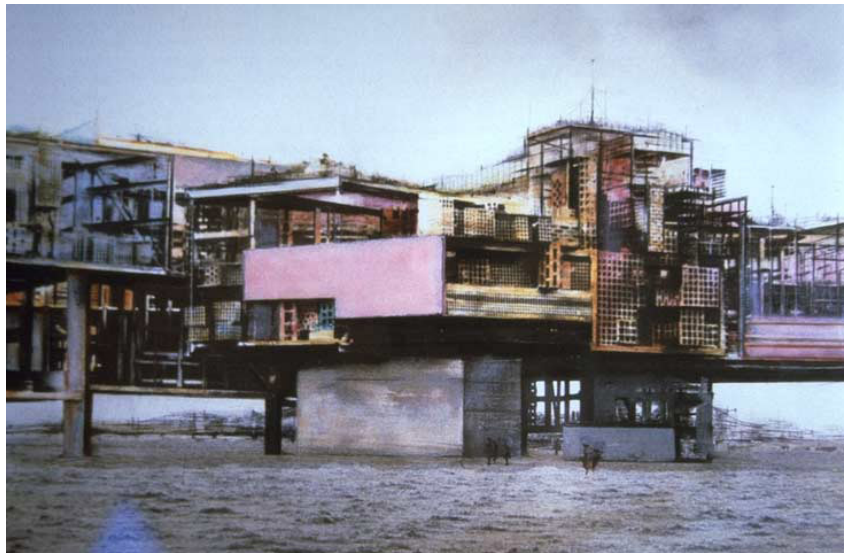
'Living with Practical Realities' focuses solely on the plight of an individual in a 1970's tower block in London. Following a similar layout to his previous work, 'Practical Realities' follows the life of an elderly woman and the various problems she encounters in her day to day life. Her struggles with money, social issues and mental and physical worry are all documented and presented as problems that we could potentially solve or answer. There are references to some of the traditional and almost clichéd concerns about tower-block living, with the old woman expressing concerns about 'going out after the schools finish' and her 'fear of travelling in the lifts at night'. Whilst the questions posed to viewers feel a little artificial, the woman's concerns are authentic, taken from Willats' interviews with her, and give it a first-

hand feel of the tower-block experience. The feel of the old woman's solitude and her experiences are given greater weight and empathy by the amount of work devoted to her. Willats presents us with nearly fifteen separate problems all relating to her life within the building, revealing a variety of difficulties that Goldfinger or Le Corbusier likely never considered.

One group of artists, however, were more interested in how these skyscraper homes would affect their enjoyment of the city more than any philanthropic interest in people.

Rebellion

The Situationists were a group formed from the remnants of artists groups and collectives, who emerged in the late fifties. They responded to how they felt modernists had abandoned the revolutionary and imaginative tendencies that had enabled them to succeed, in favour of a more organised and careful manner that would gain artists more employment. The movement '*had cleaned up its image, systematically sidelining expressionisms in favour of a 'functional', 'rational' program for universal clean living*' (Sadler 1998: 6). So to Guy Debord and his cohorts, the Modernist movement represented by Le Corbusier and his habitation units had reached a dead end in the form of mass production and association with government. They had taken the efficiency of Modernism and perverted it into something formulaic and utterly uninspiring.



New Babylon
Constant Nieuwenhuys, 1956-1974
Mixed-Media

Not known for their sociability, the Situationists were more volatile and confrontational than some groups. Perhaps realising this, Debord and the others were far more willing to test their theories and conduct experiments on themselves rather than other people outside the group. Debord's 'Guide Psychogéographique De Paris',

created with Asger Jorn, displays the patterns, routes, and decisions that he made as he ‘drifted’ through the city – a term he was happy to call the ‘derive’. He would wander the city and investigate new and fascinating areas simply by virtue of taking one turn instead of another.

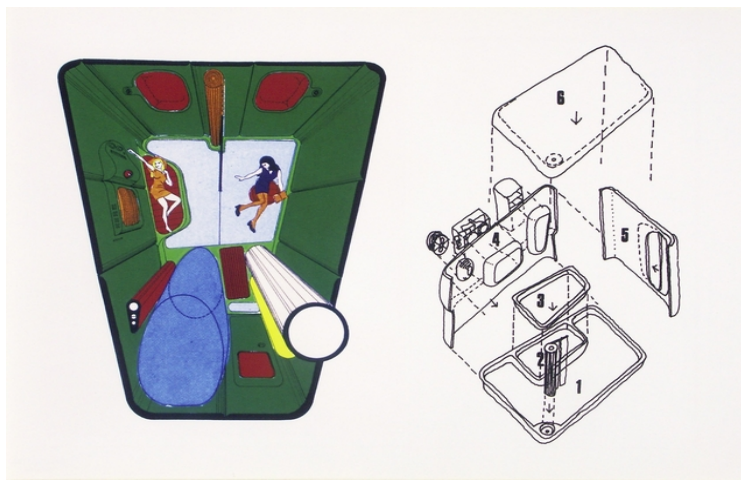


‘New Babylon de Constant’
Vincent Nieuwenhuys, 2005
Video Still

The thrill and excitement of an unpredictable city was something Constant, a Situationist for a brief period, sought to capture with ‘New Babylon’. The city was designed to be almost erratic in its design, with various elements arising to confront and excite the visitor. *‘Layers of girders mesh themselves out before you in vast scaffolding arrangements; tracing a path along what seems to be a corridor, you’re suddenly confronted with a towering steel barrier, or a precipitous drop to the traffic below’* (Fox 2000) tells us that this city was meant to be the ultimate expression of Debord’s derive – New Babylon could be exciting, ominous, dangerous, violent and oppressive, all in the effort to get people to experience the city in a different way. Constant rejected the notion of urban planning because it made his city too predictable. He wished for visitors to play and explore like children, even theorising that man would evolve to a different state – Homo Ludens – in this way. The entire city could be played with to allow further discovery and fun – Constant envisioned walls being moved, light levels and temperature controlled to allow perfect moments like rounding a corner and being shown a perfect moon, or the slight, exhilarating terror of a dark alley. The key element was control, put back into the hands of citizens as opposed to those in authority or power. Constant would give excitement back to the masses perpetually living in their cemetery-like homes.

New Babylon never saw resolution as an actual city, and exists only as a massive collection of work and media created by Constant, an *‘endless series of models, sketches, etchings, lithographs, collages, architectural drawings, and photocollages, as well as in manifestos, essays, lectures, and films’* (in Van Den Bergan 1998), yet Constant always perceived it as something that could be realised. His models were photographed by his son, Victor, and this lends some weight to this idea – The

and enthusiasm for today's wish-dreams can adequately interpret them into built environment' (in Cook/Webb 1999; 28) declares a page of the magazine, perhaps stating that only Archigram was willing to go where others only dreamed of. And indeed, Archigram laid down various ideas, such as 'Plug-In City' (1962-64) – investigating the idea of an '*urban environment programmed and structured for change*' (in Cook/Webb 1999; 36), again suggesting their grasp and thorough enjoyment of modern technology. Peter Cook's 'Instant City' (1969) suggested a world that existed for only a week at a time, floating from place to place and delivering city culture to people before moving on. The idea is a little uncomfortable, despite the bright visual appeal of Cook's design, but suggests the fleeting trends of popular culture – When a person's interests change with the wind, why stay more than a week? Both revolved around change, be it Plug-In City's capacity for expansion, or Instant City's travelling circus of culture.



'Capsule Homes Project' (Perspective and Exploded Axonometric)

Warren Chalk, 1964

Drawn and Coloured Schematics

Archigram's contribution to housing concepts came in the form of the 'Capsule'. Eventually designed to fit alongside Plug-In City, the Capsule was a distillation and refinement of the tower block concept. Moving away from Le Corbusier's fantasy of some disembodied hand slipping in prefabricated homes into a concrete frame, Archigram envisioned a single circular tower with the boxy units stacked atop and around one another, tightly packed for maximum efficiency. The design of the unit is visionary, but remarkably inhumane. Every single element of the home – including the bathroom, utility shaft and is cramped into a small space barely big enough for two people, and the design seems to suggest there is not much space for a bed. The idea of a family is null and void, seemingly, and Archigram's love of technology again shines through. If Archigram were supposed to be making '*arguments about style, society, modernity, technology*' (Sadler 2005; x) then it seems that they forgot the one thing that made all those possible; people.

Conclusion

Tower block housing was a revolutionary idea, and certainly a good answer to the problem of a distinct lack of housing in the wake of the Second World War, but the issue against it comes from choice and control. Too often, people are placed in buildings like Trelick Tower against their will, and this merely breeds contempt and dissent against an authority at worst. At best, a person living somewhere against their will becomes frightened, lonely and paranoid, as Willats displays.

Le Corbusier was the only one approached by a group of working-class people to build one of his tower blocks, and the approaches from both the Situationists and Archigram display that they too did not consider the will of the people. None of them took polls or interviewed average people – the very same that would live in their cities and housing units – for their perspective. Constant produced an eloquent counter to the control of the tower block, but New Babylon was unfeasible in a predominantly capitalist world, and he perhaps did not consider how ingrained the current systems were, and the difficulty in removing them.

No-one, save Stephen Willats, considered the core element necessary to the success of any housing design or city; People. Archigram worked by the assumption that their 'Capsule' housing would be a success, and whilst capsule hotels in Japan are popular, the concept clearly hasn't been a worldwide hit. By not truly considering people, these varied responses to the new social housing of the Twentieth Century were as doomed as the tower blocks themselves.

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