Planning Theory and Practice - Interface Special Issue

Robin Hood Gardens: The aesthetic politics of listed buildings

Dr Edward Brookes

University of Hull

e.brookes@hull.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3627-3508

Redeveloping Robin Hood Gardens

Robin Hood Gardens (RHG) was a brutalist social housing estate in Poplar, East London, built in 1972 by British architects Alison and Peter Smithson and since 2017 has been undergoing demolition to be turned into luxury flats as part of the Blackwall Reach Development scheme. Its recent trajectory has followed a similar pattern of state led gentrification experienced by many other inner-city housing estates; with a history of managed decline, public stigmatisation and private sector redevelopment (Thoburn, 2022; Watt, 2021; Lindner & Sandoval, 2021; Watt & Smets, 2017). However, what makes the estate worthy of discussion is the central role that listing, art and heritage have played in the site's gentrification; especially the ways in which they have been mobilised to disempower those that lived on the estate. In this case I wish to focus on the campaign to list RHG and the discussions between institutions who wanted to preserve it, which included; the C20 Society (Preservation charity focused on preserving 20th century architecture) and the Victoria & Albert Museum, alongside those who felt it was not worth saving; Historic England (English Heritage until 2015), Tower Hamlets (TH) Council and the Department for Digital Media, Culture and Sport. By focusing on

the debate between these institutions I want to contribute to this special issue's concern with the complexity of engagement surrounding arts and planning and the use of arts and heritage as an economic strategy. In particular I engage with the aesthetic politics surrounding the estate's immunity from listing and how competing narratives of value associated with housing have led to the appropriation of the site as an art / cultural artefact which has subsequently undermined the area's community use.

Preservation Controversy

Discussions concerning the preservation of RHG began in 2007 after applications were submitted by TH Council and the C20 society for both a Certificate of Immunity (COI) and spot listing. The final assessment by English Heritage recommended the estate be immune from listing, citing how the estate was bleak in its original design, no longer created a 'sense of community' and was unable to be regarded as a successful form of housing. This led to the approval of the council's application by the Secretary of State (upheld again in 2015 after the initial COI had expired) leading to the start of the estate's demolition in 2017.

Shortly after demolition had started the Victoria & Albert museum decided to salvage a two-storey section of the site to be partially exhibited at the 2018 Venice Biennale (titled 'Ruins in Reverse'), presenting it as an important example of brutalist social housing. The fragments are to have a permanent home in the new V&A East development on the Stratford waterfront, opening in 2024. This is surprising considering the recommendation not to list by English Heritage and the irony that while the estate was perceived to no longer have value as a form of housing, it still retained an aesthetic and heritage value that could be capitalised on at the expense of the community. Both decisions by English Heritage and the V&A's acquisition were met with a great deal of backlash from members of the community and the architectural press who felt the site was being exploited as part of a wider gentrification of the area (Thoburn, 2022).

What these events illuminate are the competing narratives associated with the aesthetic value of

housing. On the one hand we see the formal recognition of the failure of the estate as a space in which people can dwell and on the other a recognition that any remaining value rests within its status as an aesthetic/heritage object. This also coincides with the recent popularity of brutalist forms of architecture and the visual appropriation of the ruin as an appealing aesthetic (Linder, 2019). The outcome of this has resulted in the community and residents being removed from any future use of the estate in its current form in favour of one which privileges the visual qualities of its architectural design.

Listing, Arts and Heritage

A major question therefore surrounds the way in which the listing and preservation process contributed to RHG's gentrification. Each of the authorities involved (English Heritage, TH Council, C20 Society, V&A, DCMS) attend to RHG purely as an 'arts/heritage object', this reflects their positions within a heritage system where value is ascribed according to historical significance while remaining impartial to the sites contemporary social politics (Brookes, 2022). Any decisions around preservation are supported through the 'objective' application of the government's criteria for listed buildings or in the case of the V&A their political impartiality as a state funded institution. The listing process therefore acts as a mechanism through which social and community voices are removed (or at least second to its architectural value). The outcome of this has resulted in a complex array of dissonant discussions around social housing policy and the role of the state in large scale urban planning projects being reduced to an isolated discussion around the estates design (Li, 2015). It presents a lack of conjoined thinking around the consequences of each organisation's preservation decisions and the impacts this would have on the residents and wider social and economic fabric of the area.

I would also argue that being 'impartial' to the estates social context *is* a political position and that choosing to focus only on the architectural value of the site meant that only a narrow understanding of the estate's role within the community as social housing could be understood. This frequently

meant that the residents of RHG were overlooked in order to produce a particular 'image' of the estate that was worthy of aesthetic appreciation for the 'Ruins in Reverse' exhibition but had failed as a form of housing. This stands in tension with many other community and artistic depictions of the estate which provide a different evaluation of the estate. For instance, work by artist Jessie Brennan (2015) brings together, images, essays, drawings, and personal experiences of tenants of the estate in order to address the personal impacts of the site's redevelopment (Brennan, 2015). Similarly, photographer Kois Miah (Jackson, 2016) presents images of the estate's residents in order to humanise those affected by the estate's demolition. Both these perspectives present a more socially and politically complex experience of the estate that goes beyond the design focused judgements by English Heritage and the V&A.

What emerges is a narrative of 'art/heritage washing' where the political nuance surrounding the estate is cleansed in favour of state supported narratives which focus on its design significance (Pritchard, 2020). This is linked to the wider gentrification and 'museumification' (Kafka, 2018) of East London, where fragments of the old estate have become cultural artefacts to be incorporated into the V&A's redevelopment of the Stratford waterfront. Listing, heritage and art in this instance have been mobilised as mechanisms through which to determine who has the right to inhabit particular spaces, and who has the power to capitalise on their artistic and heritage value. This begs the question how can we stop the listing and heritage process from becoming a tool through which those with power can justify urban redevelopment projects while still exploiting the architectural assets of communities (knowingly or not)?

Reconceptualising Listing

To answer this question, I argue that the statutory criteria for listed buildings (and broader historical assessments) involving lived spaces should not be separated from the present social and political realities of the places they look to assess. While social and political factors should not solely determine a buildings suitability for preservation, they should also not be excluded from the process.

Although there is growing acknowledgment of community value in the assessment of listed buildings – I do not think it goes far enough to justify the impact that choosing to list (or not) will have on the community and its economic and social significance. This also extends to sites where listing has been approved and a similar process occurs – whereby residents are 'unhomed' as the sites historical significance can be used to rebrand the area and attract greater investment (Roberts, 2017).

What the example of RHG demonstrates is the complexity of arts and heritage within the planning process and how they are mobilised as an economic strategy. The contradictions between different heritage organisations (between preservation or not) and the value they ascribe to sites of artistic/heritage significance appear only to serve those seeking to develop the area. Meanwhile, the community and other artists looking to challenge what they see as exploitative regeneration and planning decisions are often overlooked. Therefore, any future reconceptualization of the listing process must account for this complexity and be seen as a malleable and a highly contested component within the broader interplay of capital, activism, property speculation and financialization – not somehow separate from it (Sterling, 2020). Institutions, planners, preservationists and artists must use their position to challenge these forces, hold them to account and be more reflexive in their engagement with sites that are actively embedded within communities, and which are at risk of being silenced.

References

Brennan, J. (2015) *Regeneration! Conversations, Drawings, Archives and Photographs from Robin Hood Gardens.* Silent Grid.

Brookes, E. (2022). *Memorability as Image: The Contested Aesthetic Politics of Robin Hood Gardens* [Unpublished PhD thesis]. Royal Holloway University of London.

Jackson, K. (2016) *Lived Brutalism: portraits from Robin Hood Gardens housing estate – in pictures.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/oct/22/lived-brutalism-portraits-from-robin-hood-gardens-housing-estate-in-pictures

Kafka, G. (2018). *London Becomes Museum.* Failed Architecture. https://failedarchitecture.com/london-becomes-museum/

Li, A. (2015). Raised by Association: Robin Hood Gardens and its interpretations. *Thresholds,* 43, 292-299. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43892699

Lindner, C. & Sandoval, G. (2021). *Aesthetics of Gentrification: Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City.* Amsterdam University Press.

Lindner, C. (2019). Brutalism, ruins and the urban imaginary of gentrification. In C. Lindner & M. Meissner (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries* (pp.277-287). Routledge.

Powers, A. (2010). *Robin Hood Gardens Re-visions.* Twentieth Century Society.

Pritchard, S. (2020). The artwashing of gentrification and social cleansing. In P. Adey, J. Bowstead, K. Brickell, V. Desai, M. Dolton, A. Pinkerton, & A. Siddiqi, (Eds.), *The Handbook of Displacement* (pp. 179-199). Palgrave Macmillan.

Roberts, D. (2017). Make public: performing public housing in Ernő Goldfinger's Balfron Tower. *The Journal of Architecture*, 22 (1), 123-150. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2016.1276096

Sterling, C. (2020). Covert erasure and agents of change in the heritage city. In V. Apaydin (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on Cultural memory and Heritage* (pp. 67-83). UCL Press.

Thoburn, N. (2022). *Brutalism as Found: Housing, Form and Crisis at Robin Hood Gardens.* Goldsmiths Press.

Watt, P. (2021). *Estate Regeneration and its Discontents.* Policy Press.

Watt, P. & Smets, P. (2017). *Social Housing and Urban Renewal: A Cross-National Perspective*. Emerald.

Funding

This article was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC White Rose Early Career Fellowship].

Dr Edward Brookes is a Research Fellow at the University of Hull. With a background in Cultural Geography his research explores the aesthetic politics of regeneration, the social and cultural politics of architecture and the role of socially engaged art in addressing social and environmental issues in urban spaces.