

D1.5 : Concepts in Design History

Essay 1

17th January 2011

Compare the way that each author is writing about the same building. What are the differences in their 'view' of it? How have opinions changed about the building?

Park Hill is a complex of flats in Sheffield completed in 1961, which over the years have a divided opinion on the place itself. Before it was built, back-to-back slums occupied the site and during the 1930s it became known as 'Little Chicago', owing to the high crime rate. It was during this time that there were plans to demolish the back-to-backs and replace them with flats. However, due to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the plan was shelved. After the war, the plans to redevelop the back-to-backs on Park Hill were looked at again. The inspiration of the design of Park Hill flats came from Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, France of which work started there in 1947 and completed in 1952. Unité d'Habitation was one the first buildings to use what was termed as 'Brutalism' architecture. This complex of flats didn't just offer accommodation but also amenities. A similar concept was incorporated into Park Hill as it offered shops, a nursery and school, pubs, doctors, chemist and dentist. Below, I have compared the two articles on Park Hill flats that were by Reyner Banham in 1961 and Beatrix Campbell in 1984 and how their views of this complex of flats differ widely. Reyner Banham was very supportive of Brutalism throughout his journalistic career and Beatrix Campbell is a writer notable for her liberal views and forceful writing style. The opinions on Park Hill flats seem to be centred around the

decks/walkways. Reyner Banham mentions that although Park Hill appears to be three linked structures, the decks link them up as one, which he says brings communities together, as he praises the 'streets in the sky' concept. By the 1980s however, Beatrix Campbell's opinions were different. She criticises the concepts of 'streets in the sky' by saying that they are no literally streets and the community spirit doesn't seem to exist, there are no amenities in the decks such as shops, pubs, parks, or street furniture such as telephone boxes and benches or places to congregate or children to play.

Reyner Banham has praised the functionality of Park Hill, such as the access on the decks. He also mentions that the irregular design of the flats was 'fascinating' and how travelling down the walkways can be seen as a 'serial experience'. To put it simply, Banaham is a supporter of the Modernism movement and Brutalism architecture, referring to it as 'bold' and 'fascinating'. In contrast, Cambell is critical of Modernism and Brutalism, describing Park Hill as 'ugly', 'awful' and 'artless'.



Here are two pictures that show the contrast in Park Hill over the years. The one on the left was taken during the 1960s and the one on the right is a more recent picture, which shows how the area has become run down.

She has also been critical of the 'streets in the sky' concept by implying that there are no places for the community and mentioning sarcastically that no-one can play in the streets as there are only 'three metres wide' and goes onto say "so the only point of being in the streets is to come and go, which is all that people do". This seems to a strange statement when there are pictures of people congregating and children playing in the walkways as this picture from the 1960s – below – depicts:



Time and context

When Park Hill flats were built in the late 1950s there was a boom in social housing to replace slums, which had poor living conditions and were associated with poverty. They were designed to create even more of a community feeling and give more of a positive feeling. At the time they were built, it was during the MacMillan Government and at that time there was none or hardly any stigmatism on social/council housing.

In fact, during this time, large council estates were being built and 'new towns' were being created. This would have influenced Banhams positive feelings on Park Hill. In contrast, when Campbell was writing in 1984, the Thatcher Government was in and places such as Park Hill were as being associated with poverty and were seen as modern day slums, which is ironic given they replaced slums. The other part of such criticism of Park Hill could also be the stigmatism associated with council housing during the 1980s, which comes from the Thatcher Government introducing the 'Right to Buy' act of 1981, in which council tenants were given the right to buy their council property and get them onto the property ladder. Places like Park hill also became plagued with high crime and drug related problems, which furthered their bad reputations. This could possibly be because of Local Government re-housing ex-offenders or troubled people to places such as Park Hill. Another reason for this high crime rate could be that the police actually refused to patrol the 'streets in the sky' as they regarded it as private property as opposed to a public place.

What could also be related to the criticisms of Park Hill flats were similar concepts that didn't work out such as Hunslet Grange, better known as Leek Street flats in Leeds. The area was a similar concept to Park Hill, being a large complex of flats and connected walkways and was built in 1968, 7 years after Park Hill was opened, but was unsuccessful. Although popular when new, within a few years the estate was plagued with problems, not only within the structure, but also socially with crime and drug problems and thus only lasted 15 years, being demolished a year before Beatrix Campbell wrote her article in 1983. It is quite possible that there would have been public resentment to both places, as during the time they became associated with poverty, there were still regarded as modern places and people would have felt that public money was wasted on such projects.

There were similar problems during this time in large estates such as the Thamesmead estate in London and the Aylesbury estate, or which the latter has been in and out of the media in recent years owing to its high crime rate and social problems in the area. All this could have contributed to the negative writing in Campbells article.

What do each of them 'leave out' in terms of their appreciations or criticism of it?

What both Banham and Campbell have left out is 'why' they think what they have written. For example, Campbell describes Park Hill as 'artless' and 'awful' but she doesn't seem to mention any details that justify it being 'artless'. Banham doesn't seem to describe the aesthetics of Park Hill either, in terms of what he finds pleasing visually about them. It is also worth mentioning that neither of them seems to focus on whether there is any community spirit within the flats and neither have even asked any residents for their opinions of the flats. Banham also describes what the experience of walking around the flats is like, as opposed to the 'feeling' of them in general. Also, the way that Campbell seems to have written her article, it sounds as though she has never lived there and has just walked around the flats, as it is seemingly written from an outside perspective, as she doesn't mention anything about whether there was any for of community spirit. How does she know that people didn't stand outside their doors and chat to their neighbours?

What lessons – both positive and negative – are there to be learnt from modernism from these reviews?

Modernism does have both a positive and negative impact on society, as it has been seen as bold and revolutionary and can provide inspiration for others. It has also been seen as forward looking and progressive and the use of glass as being honest, reflecting that there is nothing to hide.

The negatives on Modernism are that the lack of beauty can make them ugly and, to some, there are no merits within the design. However, they do not try to be pretty and this could possibly mean that over time they can be seen as ugly.

Apart from the looks of Modernist architecture, the fundamental idea was also to bring people and the community together with shops, pubs etc. It did make a lot of people in the community happy at the time, as everything they needed was close to them and it would also mean that they could see their neighbours, friends more often. In a collection of quotes collected in Sheffield City Council's study of Park Hill, one former resident described how 'It was a fantastic place to live and I only have good memories. It was a community [where] everyone knew each other', and another describing how living there was 'like being in heaven'. 'However, over the years, it would become negative as it would become a centre ground for crime and would tend to push the area into decline, meaning the idea of 'streets in the sky' would become an area that was dangerous, poorly lit walkways where the public do not feel safe to walk, particularly at night. One resident noted how 'I think the council must have contributed to the flats' decline by putting problem people on it instead of spreading round the council housing stock. Kids ran amok and vandalism was rife'.

In conclusion we have seen how the views on Modernism architecture have changed over the years from being praised and seen as the future when new and how, at a young age of around 20 years, a structure such as Park Hill was criticised for how they looked and became dilapidated and the people's opinions have changed, especially those who lived there. In 1998 the structure was listed as a Grade II* building, it is the largest listed structure and was not met without controversy with some criticising its history and the cost. However, it is now undergoing major regeneration by Urban Splash, which is now converting it into a mixture of private apartments and social housing and business units.

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ⁱ BBC News South Yorkshire

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