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Every House on Langland Road – the production of archival, architectural and artistic spaces

This article describes an Arts Council England project, undertaken by the author and a photographer, to examine spatial and temporal relations between an art project, its subject and its audience. The project explored and documented the architecture of a modernist 1970s housing estate, Netherfield (Figure 1), designed by a group of four architects for the new city of Milton Keynes. The estate has not aged well and the visual remnants of what had been an ambitious and somewhat idiosyncratic housing scheme were to be photographed and juxtaposed with the original architectural drawing. This juxtaposition would, we proposed, compare the idealised vision of an arguably privileged professional class with the fallout and detritus of intervening years which saw the estate fall short of the bourgeois community originally predicted.



Figure 1: Netherfield in near pristine condition, as photographed by John Donat for the MKDC in 1975 (image: courtesy of Milton Keynes City Discovery Centre Licensed under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#))

As the art project progressed, the photographic lens contributed to a more complex series of perspectives which included the archival history of the estate and its surrounding new city, the careers of the estate's architects, the people who live there, and my own reflections on a council estate childhood. In turn these perspectives are set out in this article in terms of the spatial and temporal realms in which they are, and continue to be, produced. These realms are loosely conceived in terms of Lefebvre's *production of space* triad, traced through the estate's historical narrative from plans to buildings which then converge in the eventual art work¹. The gallery is seen as an assemblage of multiple connections drawn between various productions of archival, architectural and artistic spaces.

THE ARCHIVE

The Milton Keynes Development Corporation was formed in 1967 to build a new city in North Buckinghamshire. Having created what is arguably the most successful of the post-war new towns, the corporation was wound up in 1992 with its various responsibilities handed to different agencies including the Milton Keynes Council where, we thought, the plans for the houses they had inherited would be kept. Several visits to the planning department revealed that any drawings they might have once owned were no longer available. Enquiries to the Corporation's other successors, English Partnerships and the Homes and Communities Agency, provided traces of the archive and HCA's legacy database could identify relevant documents but not their location. However, the Centre

for Buckinghamshire Studies had recently received funding to catalogue the collection which had, it transpired been passed onto the County Council.

The archivist eventually located microfilm copies of the architectural department's plans including elevation drawings of seven of the eight blocks of Netherfield terraces which would make up each 800m street of the estate. The houses were to be built on a gently rising and falling landscape but rather than allow the topography of the site to determine the heights of the buildings the architects sought to achieve a constant roofline across the whole 1km² site. Each dwelling would be set above or below ground level to support this roofline, each block would shift seamlessly between one to three storeys, and each front garden would rise or fall towards the front door to accommodate this level. The drawings, even with one block missing, clearly demonstrate this architectural conceit along with the clean and uncluttered vision of how the houses would look when built (Figure 2).

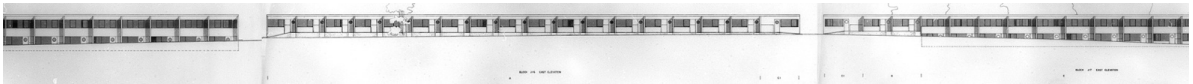


Figure 2: Netherfield, drawn into the contour of the landscape (image: courtesy of the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies)

This idealised vision of the street was supplemented with a remarkable 6m long tracing paper scroll which had been found, at our request, by one of the architects in his cellar. The drawing, collectively produced in 1971 as a working exposition of their ideas for the estate, proposed possible features of the site. A pyramid here, a dome there, and impressions of who would move into the houses, the furnishings they would bring with them and the types of cars they would drive (Figure 3). This vision was more explicitly

conjured by the critic Robert Maxwell's prediction of the estate's bourgeois residents with their motor-boat kits and hens in the garden².

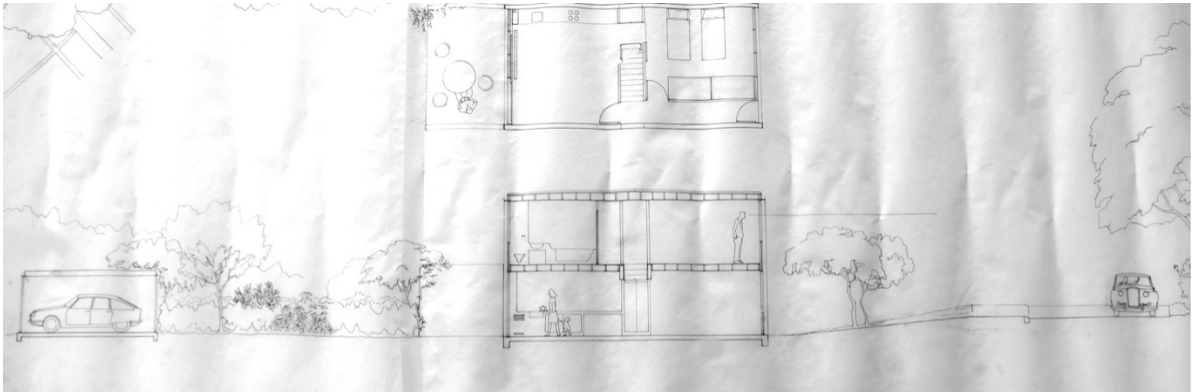


Figure 3: Detail of scroll showing architect's impression of life on the estate. A Bentley here, a Citroen GS there. Drawing: courtesy of Chris Cross

Together these two archival sources produce a number of effects. The fragility of the archival trail demonstrates potential problems which arise when publicly accountable bodies rise and fall according to the whim of central governments. The tactile presence of the scroll also performed a critical role in the research process, providing an object around which the four architects regrouped and revisited their project, 45 years later. Their conversation around this drawing exposed a collective acceptance that Netherfield was a failed housing estate. Their project had, in their view, been an unfortunate error they had created together in a young and naive past when ideas about how and where people would live were still infused with the optimism of the post war consensus³.

The archive also preserves the minute books of Corporation board meetings where Netherfield was discussed and eventually approved. Over several months in 1971 and 1972 a number of dissenting voices queried the scale of the project, the lack of humanity in the design, the unfashionable status of terraced housing at the time, the technological

shortcomings of flat roofs and, the unlikelihood that the estate in the proposed form could meet the initial requirement for a 50-50 split between rental and private ownership⁴. It was begrudgingly concluded that the houses could only be used for social housing, a decision since revised through the advent of a tenant's right to buy policy imposed by central government. Subsequent sale to landlords for multiple occupancy rents would have implications for the residents and the condition of their houses.

Already the art project had overstepped the initial expectation of an apparently straightforward search for an archive drawing to be used in an exhibition. What had begun as a simple visual element for an exhibition had produced a collection of objects and ideas which expanded the spatial and temporal prospects for the exhibition. The tracing paper scroll became a centre piece for conversation, having been accidentally deployed as a visual method of elicitation and reconciliation for the architects. It had also emerged as an embodied means of containing, circulating and preserving their ideas, ideals and aspirations for the residents of their unbuilt streets. The missing elevation drawing from the archive became a symbolic gap in the historical record, occasioned by and underlining the gaps that emerge through, successive ideologies about how communities should evolve and who should be responsible for this.

THE STREET

Perspective was a key element of the architects' plan for Netherfield. The straight lines of terraces would, through the undulation of the site, become three dimensional curves accentuated by the addition of a short, curvilinear "fin" between each dwelling along the terraces. Even when looking at the houses straight on, the foreground shifts and the fins splay out to disturb the clean lines of the drawings. The proposition, to collect and compile an image of the street that could be set alongside the architects' drawings, required an empirical technique facilitated with a "shift lens". This device, a mainstay of architectural photography, would counteract the perspectival differences produced by the camera as it was pointed up or down to maintain a constant roofline across every image.

This process, one house at a time, all along the street required stamina and planning. To ensure enough information was collected we needed three photographs of each of the 150 houses and each needed to line up accurately in the viewfinder. A rhythm emerges: stand, click, step, stop. The plan was to record the elevation of the street as we found it and with as little intervention beyond the technicalities already described as possible. This image of the heroic photographer assiduously capturing their subject in the name of art is easy to portray but less easy to defend.

Producing these images, in one of the most deprived areas of both the city and the country⁵, presented an obvious and anticipated challenge. The presence of a camera on the street provokes reactions. It is undoubtedly an imposition to point a camera at a house especially if such houses represent the only piece of territory their tenants have some kind of control over. The experience also provoked a personal response for me, having been born and raised in a council estate in Milton Keynes⁶. In revisiting the environment there was a sense that the ideals of the architects and the memories of a 1970s childhood had somehow been erased and overdrawn by a different ideology which contrived to dissipate the community through the advent of Multiple Occupancy Houses and the removal of subsidies, support networks and social services.

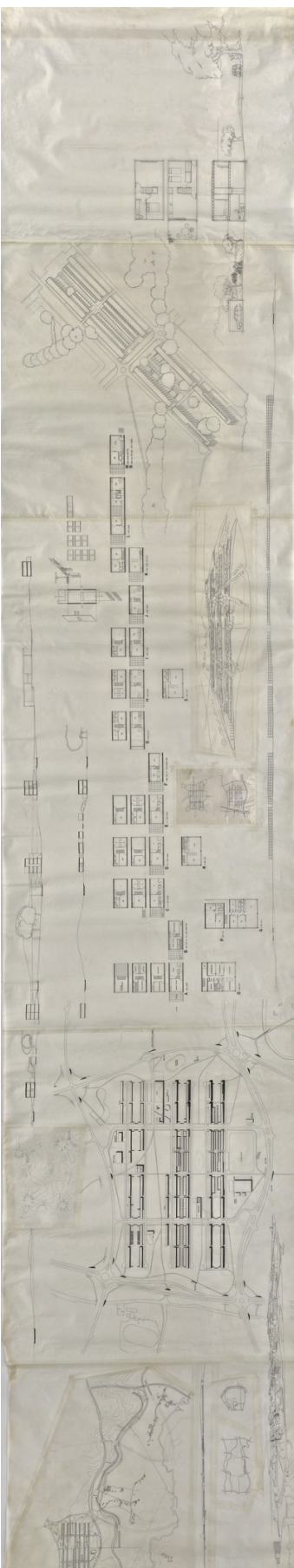
We expected our imposition to be questioned yet almost every resident we met were keen to engage, to find out what we were doing, to ask if we were from the Council and had information on the recently announced regeneration schedule and rumoured demolition of the estate. They were keen to tell us how much they liked living on the street, how the

sense of community and proximity to family was important to them. One resident was very vocal in their objection to our perceived probing into their privacy, and perhaps their privation, and this provoked some consternation and debate about how or whether to include this missing house. Others wanted to know how they could find out where and when the exhibition was on.

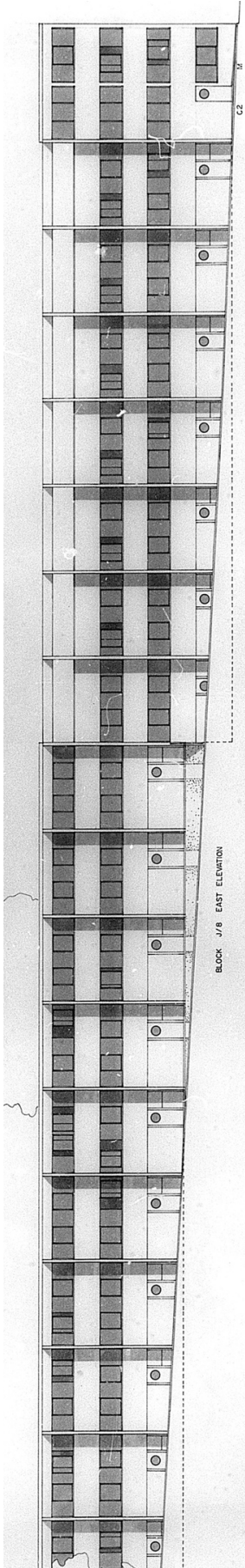
We recognised that other artists directly engage with communities at different stages of the work. Distribution of cameras and collective exhibitions are a mainstay of both community art programmes and academic urban interventions⁷. Our project had a separate community engagement element based around the exhibition space and the display of the archival and photographic material generated. Nevertheless, our presence, and our performance of the photographic process, functioned in a similar way to the architects' drawing, whereby the means of production of the visual object, as well as the object itself, becomes a method of elicitation: a means of making connections with and between residents, the houses they lived in and the lives they wanted to live.

Constructing a perspective free photographic record of the street produces a 3m long parallax-free vision of the street as it stands, to be presented alongside the original drawings of exactly the same view. This device, an expansive and extensive "now and then" panoramic visual comparison, concatenates these perceived and conceived spaces and also conflates the time elapsed between them. The architects' idealised conceptions of how residents might live in their new homes, as envisaged and preserved in the archival record, now contrasts sharply against how the ideals and the homes have

survived. The surviving structures, like the ideals, are not in ruins but they are not well preserved.



:4: Architect's 6m scroll of proposed scheme. Drawing: courtesy of Chris Cross



:5: One block of MKDC architects' department drawing of street Image: courtesy of the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies.



:6: One block of Every House on Langland Road. Image: courtesy of Simon Phipps

THE GALLERY

A gallery is primarily a visual space and, appropriately, this exhibition is dominated by the 6m long scroll in its bespoke vitrine. Additional historical and conceptual elements are written up for inclusion in a book, itself an exhibit, which brings together the conceptual and the visual. Photographs and drawing are montaged onto the same single page of a 3m long leporello, a format which borrows heavily from *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, the 1966 work by pop-artist Ed Ruscha⁸. Ruscha's artistic identity was developed around the identification and amplification of the aesthetic of the mundane and found object. This photographic record of Sunset Strip was, for Ruscha, a challenge to the predominant orthodoxy of the authorship of the artist, arguing that his camera with its flat perspective and remote auto-exposures from a tripod on the back of a pickup truck, was an objective process of recording. According to Ruscha, "you see the city from a lot of different angles on that street. I was trying to get a sense of the complete personality of the street when I made the book about the Sunset Strip."⁹ His "deadpan photography" is a tempting proposition when looking to produce images to be presented alongside drawings where the audience is invited to make their own comparisons and draw their conclusions about what is portrayed.

There is in *Every House on Langland Road* a sense of different angles and personalities. The montage of multiple exposures into a simple elevation produces an impossible archetypal view of each house, not dissimilar to the Becher's typologies¹⁰. The process removes the clutter of foreground elements and the distraction of contrasting perspectives, both of which are unavoidable when walking the street or

viewing conventional architectural portraits. Combined into a single image the characteristics, the personality, of the whole street are presented for comparison with the architecturally drawn vision of the estate. But this objective gaze is contrived. The images have been carefully framed, carefully selected, and carefully montaged together to present an illusory lack of perspective as they attempt to mimic the technical drawings. The accompanying text explains this conceit while the images in the leporello format embody it (Figure 7). The reader is invited to produce their own version of the street and a possible walk along it. As the paper is unfolded it becomes disproportionately thin and fragile and difficult to handle. It demands, as Reynolds observed, a constant readjustment of perspective in relation to the text¹¹. The reader adopts the stance of the flaneur as they navigate their way along the printed street, following the folds and turning corners, juxtaposing one image with another and another. This introduces into the streetscape a series of actions and responses that the architects, with their straight rationalist lines, denied the pedestrian.



Figure 7: Every House on Langland Road.

Ruscha's leporello has been compared to Lefebvre's conception of representational space in which the viewer is empowered to appropriate and reconfigure the urban space.¹² This comparison also helps to understand the exhibition as a real-and-imagined space where the interaction between the viewer and the viewed reproduces the viewed. A number of complementary spatialities are enacted within the text and the gallery around it. On the one hand are clean line-drawn houses where comparative contours of roofline and foreground are clear and the simple sequencing of drawings creates an unbroken vista of the elevation. Complementing this vista is the juxtaposed "objective" and "deadpan" photography of the houses, montaged and flattened to remove distortions of perspective and stitched together into a single view. This also offers an ideal representation of the

street but one which is infused with the physical and material aspects of the houses, the contortions of their histories as perceived on the ground. Where the facades have been modified this is starkly visible against the uniformity, symmetry and repetition of the street's modernist design. Door furniture and window fittings offer additional evidence of the evolving technologies and succession of ownership through which the houses have been inhabited. The accumulated debris of habitation is visible in the sliced up foregrounds of the houses. The only person who chose to stay in frame during the shoot is a domestic cleaner who insistently posed in the doorway of the last house on Langland road, accompanied by his recently filled refuse sacks (Figure 8).

But this is not an exhibition of the ideal home nor a critique of the failings of that ideal through the presentation of its processual decay or ruin¹³. Rather it presents visual elements rendered from the historical record and reports clear statements of intent from the architects. The built form of the city is a photographic subject, an archival object and an art exhibit. The gallery becomes an assemblage of temporal layers, archival spaces, artistic practices and architectural places.



Figure 8: The last house on Langland Road (image: courtesy of Simon Phipps)

Acknowledgements

Every House on Langland Road would not have been possible without the ongoing assistance of architects Chris Cross, Jeremy Dixon, Mike Gold and Ed Jones and the longstanding collaboration between the author and photographer Simon Phipps.

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¹ The exhibition *Every House on Langland Road* by Simon Phipps and Darren Umney opened at Milton Keynes Gallery in June 2017 and then at the Architectural Association Gallery, London in January 2018. The exhibition website is <http://www.netherfield.estate>.

² Maxwell, R. 1975. Two housing schemes at Milton Keynes. *Architects' Journal*, vol. 162, no.50, pp.1247-1260.

³ Interview with Chris Cross, Ed Jones, Jeremy Dixon and Mike Gold, 29th September 2016.

⁴ Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor. 1968. *Milton Keynes Interim Report*. London.

⁵ Netherfield was, in 2015, listed by the Office of National Statistics as one of the most 1% deprived areas in the country.

⁶ This sensibility echoes the ongoing discourse evolving from the recollections and reinterpretations of lives lived on the estate, seen for example in Lynne Hanley's *Estates: An Intimate History* (Granta, 2012) and Ian Waite's *Middlefield: A Postwar Council Estate in Time* (Uniformbooks, 2017). Such personal accounts provide a useful counterpoint to the increasing, and not unwelcome, interest in the more aesthetic and architectural representations of post-war architecture in general, with specific interests emerging in social housing as a genre and brutalism as a stylistic trope.

⁷ Stephen Willats had been engaged as an artist on Netherfield for his 2007 work *Person to Person, People to People*.

⁸ Ruscha, E. 1966 *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. Los Angeles: Ed Ruscha.

⁹ Interviewed by Michael Auping in Ruscha, E., Auping, M., & Prince, R. (2011). *Ed Ruscha: Road Tested*. Forth Worth, Modern Art Museum.

¹⁰ Like Ruscha, Bernd and Hilla Becher strived to create an objective record of the built environment.

¹¹ Reynolds, M. 2015. Landscape in Motion. *Journal of Urban History*, vol 41, no.6, pp. 1052-1072.

¹² Allan, K. (2010) Ed Ruscha, Pop Art, and Spectatorship in 1960s Los Angeles, *The Art Bulletin*, 92:3, 231-249.

¹³ Although Netherfield has been written off by various commentators its status as a ruin is closer to Beswick's reading of nostalgia (Beswick, K. 2015, Ruin Lust and the Council Estate, *Performance Research* Vol. 20 , no.3) than the more physical states reckoned by DeSilvey & Edensor (DeSilvey, C, & Edensor, T 2013, 'Reckoning with ruins'. *Progress In Human Geography*, 37, 4, pp. 465-485).