

Some episodes. Park Hill. Sheffield

In an *Architectural Review* of 1961 - the year of Park Hill's completion - Reyner Banham wrote of his admiration for the way in which the flats wound around the elevated site: 'When one looks out from some part of Park Hill and sees another of its limbs swinging across the view, the effect is like that of suddenly realising that the railway lines on the other side of some valley in Switzerland are the same that one's own train has just traversed a few moments before.'

I doubt many of its residents thought of Switzerland, but shortly after moving in, one elderly lady did describe living in the flats as 'like being in heaven.'

--

Four storeys at the Talbot Street end and thirteen at Anson Street, Park Hill's horizontal roofline emphasises Sheffield's topography.

The blocks curve like parentheses, enfolding high ground.

--

People frequently assert that Sheffield is built on seven hills - like Rome - though in fact it's likely to be eight or more. Its heights rise between the Rivers Don, Sheaf, Loxley and Rivelin, and the Porter, Meers, Owlser, Limb, Carr and Blackburn Brooks. One hill is transmitter topped.

Another capped with an Iron-age fort.

One bears the building in which Mary Queen of Scots endured her imprisonment.

In the south one sports a leggy modernist water tower.

To the northwest the Deer Park flats stand as exclamation marks.

Sometimes the city simply frays into Peak District moorland.

Views from one hilltop to another unfold the larger city as Park Hill rings its centre. I remember peering out from Brincliffe where the glass stairwell in Psalter Lane's beautiful brutalist C-Block offered an astonishing urban and rural prospect to those with time to look. This building, now razed like so much of Sheffield's once visionary architecture, was once home to the purpose-built painting and sculpture facilities of the art school; there I watched summertime thunderstorms erupt and shudder; lightning picked out the higher ground and the city horizon fluctuated as water rippled the glass.

--

The mid-century Corporation looked at Sheffield and imagined Europe.

They wrote: 'the building up of hill-top architectural compositions - is gradually producing something of the fascination of the Italian hill towns.'

This curious conjunction of South Yorkshire and Italy persists: as unlikely as it seemed to contemporary residents, architect Will Alsop was another who imagined nearby Barnsley could be rethought of as a 21st century Tuscan hill village...

--

Eventually dubbed the People's Republic of South Yorkshire for its Socialist stance (sometimes fondly and sometimes not) Sheffield had often looked beyond British shores for inspiration and political solidarity. The city hosted an ill-fated 1950 world peace conference (the Attlee government refused visas to many of the overseas delegates so it was forced to relocate to Warsaw) during which Picasso famously drew a dove of peace on a napkin whilst eating at Butler's Dining Rooms, and was

twinned with Soviet-era Donetsk (now part of Ukraine) with whom it even signed a peace treaty during the East-West Cold War stand off.

Back in 1949 the Chair of the Town Planning Committee, the Town Clerk, City Architect and Planning Officer traveled to view new developments in Copenhagen and Stockholm. They described what they found in *Multi-Storey Housing in Some European Countries: Report of the City of Sheffield Housing Deputation*.

Later they proudly published a review of *Ten Years of Housing in Sheffield* in three languages: English, French and Russian. Now the poles were reversed: architects from across Europe and America came to inspect what was being built in Sheffield. Park Hill was its jewel in the crown.

--

The 1971 promotional film *Sheffield... City on the Move* (now familiar to many from the short excerpt which opens *The Full Monty*) begins with Park Hill golden beneath blue skies, in the foreground stands the soot-blackened Midland Railway station. The film continues Sheffield's international theme: European tourists - two *à la mode* Swedish girls - are variously introduced to cutlery, 'cuisine' (as the narrator rather grandly describes it) and a series of nightclubs; they look as if they are having a pretty good time.

Later, footage shows miscellaneous conference delegates listening carefully via bulbous headphones to matters of unknown import: the voiceover earnestly reassures potential conference organisers about the city's ability to deliver simultaneous translation on demand.

--

By the later 1980's when I arrived into Sheffield on a train from the North, buddleia had advanced across the crumbling remains of the Lower Don Valley's industry and Park Hill had greyed and rusted and spalled..

The city was in decline, and decline was in the air - a councilor would claim the flats were 'a cloud of bad breath hanging over Sheffield.'

Park Hill took on a fortress stance behind the station. At night though, the flats still glimmered, drawing a curtain wall of lights across the dark.

--

Jarvis Cocker's 1992 recording of *Sheffield Sex City* infused the place with eroticism: 'We finally made it... on a hilltop at 4 AM. The whole city is your jewellery box. A million twinkling yellow street lights. Reach out and take what you want. You can have it all. Jesus, it took a long time. I didn't think we were going to make it. So bad during the day, but now snug and warm under an eiderdown sky. All the things we saw: everyone on Park Hill came in unison at 4.13 AM and the whole block fell down.'

Later he intones: 'Trying to get things done but ending up on a tour round the fleshpots of Sheffield in a T-reg Chevette. Wybourn, Brincliffe, Intake - All these places really exist and maybe these adventures still happen there - I wouldn't know; I don't live there anymore.'

It's the same now for me. Nearly twenty years on and I'm living on the 24th floor of a block hundreds of miles away from the city where I spent my formative years. I look out to an entirely different view, but if I close my eyes I can time travel back

to an afternoon on Park Hill: bumping into some friends, going back for tea and biscuits and conversation, gazing out from their flat, talking about the estate.

Sheffield's architects tried the same trick, but they weren't at all interested in the past, they headed resolutely forwards. Whole areas of the city were thrust into another century, Victorian slums vanished into airy modernity.

--

Contemporary blogger Matthew Mella suggests the view of Park Hill seen from the station as one leaves by train is 'a goodbye wave from the city of the future'.

Sheffield really was such a place. I think of the pictures I've seen showing the newly constructed estate in Gleadless' 'happy valley', designed by the Corporation architects J. Lewis Womersley and team. A sort of socialist South Yorkshire version of fifties' southern California (as one journalist puts it.)

This is how it was, before poverty and underinvestment did their usual work.

--

In the early nineties, older and rather battered, Park Hill was still strangely futuristic, albeit in a raggedy *District 9* science fiction sort of way. The once state-of-the-art Garchey waste disposal system, through which refuse could be vacuum-powered away and then incinerated without any need for human handling, always had something of the steampunk about it, what with all those valves and pipes and a plethora of pressure dials in the basement...

Extensive tunnels run through the vast building to accommodate all the service ducts - one young resident remembers how he misconstrued this word and thought that there were 't'ducks' beneath the flats, which adds a certain fairytale element to the scenario: photographs from contemporary urbex navigations reveal a grimier reality, mangy pigeons the only avian residents.

--

Most articles about Park Hill mention 'streets in the sky' and describe how the access decks were wide enough to accommodate milk floats. This last feature seemingly captured people's imagination. Perhaps there was something of the fun fair about it, with the little vehicles trundling along their route high above the city.

Utopia.

Dystopia.

Writers usually go on to describe the 'inevitable' decline of the flats... lifts smelling of piss... drug dealing... muggings... gun shots fired near the school. The word 'sink estate' is applied. 'Problem families'. 'Antisocial behavior'. Jargon is bandied about, nicknames acquired: by the nineties 'it was like San Quentin on there.'

--

Sheffield embraced the apocalyptic tendencies of SF both as fiction and fact.

It was destroyed twice on film firstly in the infamous *Threads* (the result of nuclear war) and the again in 1999 *The Last Train* (this time a meteor strike.)

In reality spasms of urban destruction (aka 'regeneration') repeatedly shook the city and Park Hill's sister developments bore the brunt: the 18 storey 'castle-keep'

section of nearby Hyde Park Flats was demolished and Kelvin was entirely erased. Ticky-tacky tiny houses popped up like a rash wherever ground was cleared; few of them replaced the council-housing stock lost through demolition.

--

Park Hill today: whole sections of the building have been stripped back to structural concrete by developers Urban Splash such that the architecture now seems the result of some sfx trickery, a wire frame diagram perforated with light.

In a 2011 contemporary art/architecture project entitled *Brutalist Speculations and Flights of Fancy*, Irene Patzüg suggested that the curving walls of the structure might have sightlines inserted from which views of Sheffield could radiate. Be careful what you wish for – in the building's current state, this is realized *in extremis*.

Stephan Hüsich meanwhile, reimagines Park Hill as a sky mobile, splitting it into shipping container-like units suspended from mysteriously unseen supports. The flats hang by a thread.

--

I find myself thinking about the gleaming show flats I've viewed online, and the visualisations of the site as it will be transformed. Urban Splash's website tells me: 'Images shown are indicative and may not represent the apartment, house or unit listed.'

In an artist's imagination, a real estate brochure or on an architect's CAD drawing anything is possible - life is usually more complicated. Take the graffito on one of Park Hill's deck bridges, which has been preserved by the developers in white neon and spells out *I LOVE YOU WILL U MARRY ME*. Jason's proposal to Clare was initially accepted. Some weeks later though they split up and she eventually married another. There was no happy ending, Clare succumbing to a cancer that proved terminal.

The name of the woman – Clare Middleton – with which the graffito began and to whom the proposal had originally been directed, was expunged from its neon remake.

--

Park Hill was once bright – pubs frontages had geometric patterned infill in red or blue, vibrant colour blocks illuminated undercrofts and the lower surfaces of stairwells had an ochre luminescence.

Accession number 3315 in the Yorkshire Film Archive is a 1962 standard 8 colour film showing the flats and their associated shopping precinct *The Pavement* not long after completion. The place bustles with coffee shops, an ice cream parlour, an outfitters... The film reveals a more utilitarian but exquisite piece of neon on Park Hill. *SHAW'S THE BUTCHERS'* sign glows scarlet with capital-lettered optimism above a display of Birds Eyes' finest frozen foods.

Park Hill now sports anodized panels and across town the Moore Street electrical substation is washed nightly by coloured lighting: the city's remaining Brutalism is being dolled up.

Caretaker Grenville Squires has famously anthropomorphized and feminized the estate. In an interview broadcast on the BBC, he told how he had thought of her as his mistress, the only one able to get him out of bed in the small hours of the night.

Now though she has come on hard times 'she just wants to wash her face and put on a new frock, and she'll be out there!'

--

Kid Acne's graffiti intervention on Park Hill asserts YOU COULDN'T MAKE IT UP Does he mean to suggest surprise that the estate is being saved? redeveloped? that it isn't to be flattened like Kelvin or the art school?

He also writes YOU GET THE IDEA

Does he mean the developer's vision for the estate? The glossy promotion, all digitally rendered? The show flat with its interior designed by architecture students? when of course most of the estate lies empty at present, awaiting reconstruction.

--

Across town at the former art school there was a last hurrah when former staff and students partied to celebrate its past and mark its departure for a new city centre site. Kid Acne was there too: he painted the nostalgic sentiment YOU'LL MISS ME WHEN I'M GONE above the front entrance.

Internet message boards and forums now mourn some of the lost architecture, which once made Sheffield utterly distinctive. The Castle Square roundabout is a case in point. Known locally as The Hole in the Road, this once beautiful subterranean modern oasis with its gliding silver escalators, ornamental fish tank, municipal planting and a range of shops was allowed to decline into a filthy, poorly-lit, unsafe, unloved space – the only people who lingered there were street drinkers with nowhere else to go. At the time of its final demise no one was especially bothered: filled with rubble from demolished flats it was sacrificed for the tram to run smoothly from High Street towards Ponds Forge.

Today its otherworldly, once futuristic experience is much missed. Nowhere else was quite like Sheffield.

Today the city centre is packed with dull hotels and corporate developments, identical to those elsewhere throughout the country; the councils 'vision' is apparently limited to shopping and service industries. For the most part it would like to rid itself of the architectural ambitions its predecessors strove to realize.

Park Hill's special presence above the station endures.
For that at least I am glad.

--

Joanne Lee