Demythologising Park Hill, Sheffield: The Hawksmoor Prize Essay 2022[*]

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ABSTRACT

The Park Hill estate in Sheffield was one of the most monumental and experimental projects in twentieth-century British housing. Designed by two young architects, Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith, it was constructed between 1957 and 1961 under the city's Labour-led council, one of the country's most visionary post-war local authorities. The estate has been celebrated for its 'streets in the sky' design, an architectural approach associated with Alison and Peter Smithson which sought to salvage and recreate patterns of working-class community and social life from the slums that were razed during the rebuilding of Britain's cities. This article deconstructs mythologies that have come to dominate narratives about Park Hill and its approach to community. It shows that the design of the estate did not recreate the pattern of nineteenth-century housing which formerly stood on the site, nor was it conceived to recreate the working-class community which had existed there. In doing so, this article reassesses the supposed political radicalism of the British welfare state in the early post-war period. While Park Hill has been acclaimed as architecturally innovative, its politics were not straightforwardly progressive. Like much post-war reconstruction, it sprang from a dialogue with older liberal frameworks of welfare delivery.

In 1953, Sheffield's city architect, John Lewis Womersley (1909–90), appointed two remarkably young architects to design the largest council housing development the city had ever seen: Park Hill.[1] They were Jack Lynn, then aged twenty-six (1926–2013), and Ivor Smith, twenty-seven (1926–2018). The plans were presented to and approved by the city council in 1955, and construction began in 1957.[2] The first phase of tenants moved in at the end of 1959 and the scheme was completed in 1961, when it was officially opened by Hugh Gaitskell, the leader of the Labour Party.[3] Within four years, just under 1,000 homes had been built in a vast, interconnected complex, ranging from four to fourteen storeys high, which continues to dominate the hillside to the east of Sheffield's city centre (Fig. 1).[4] The Park Hill estate was built during the brief 'boom' in multi-storey building in Britain which reached its peak between 1958 and 1968, under the acute pressure of post-war demands for public housing

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stock.[5] The city engineer, Henry Foster, hoped that Park Hill would offer high-density living (at 178 persons to the acre) 'while maintaining a good standard of amenity' for its inhabitants.[6]

Sheffield was one of the most ambitious local authorities in the country and Park Hill was its flagship post-war estate.[7] It was a monumental project, and one of the most architecturally distinctive examples of post-war state planning in Britain. From its construction to the present day, it has garnered much attention for the radicalism of its architectural form and in particular for its 'streets in the sky' deck-access design which purported to preserve in the new estate the street life of the slums that were razed during the post-war rebuilding of Britain's cities.

At the opening of Park Hill, the chairman of Sheffield's housing development committee hailed the scheme as 'stimulating; exciting!'.[8] The influential magazine *Architectural Design*, which dedicated its September 1961 issue to Sheffield's reconstruction, stated that at Park Hill 'solutions have been devised that are creating an exceptionally high density on a scale hitherto unknown in this country: in fact, a radically new proposition for living in Sheffield'.[9] Its self-consciously social approach was especially applauded. Writing in the special issue, David Lewis, an architect (and poet) with links to the Independent Group, described Park Hill as 'one of the most remarkable buildings in England today', praising in particular its designers' approach to the question of community:

> [Park Hill] is not intending to be Architecture with a big abstract A; but more directly [a] building which has arisen from observations and propositions to do with specific people in a particular place, and the environmental tools they need for life and community. It springs from an assessment—objective, compassionate, ideological—of the character of the community itself; its structure and its resilience; the terms of its stability weighed against those of change; and its significance for us is that these things have been taken by the designers as the key and stimulus to the social/environmental form which the buildings, and the people who now live in them, realize together as a whole.[10]

Writing in the *Architectural Review* in December 1961, Reyner Banham similarly praised the estate as a 'most imaginative and advanced community-building gesture' (although, as we will see, his enthusiasm for the project later abated).[11]

Two years on, Park Hill was still attracting praise and acclaim. In January 1963, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) organised a special 'appraisal' at its Portland Place headquarters in London, and the proceedings were published in the *RIBA Journal* that summer.[12] The event included the screening of a film about the estate, followed by a formal discussion in which a number of architects — including Oliver Cox, John Darbourne and Cyril Sweett — quizzed Lewis Womersley and Ivor Smith about the details of their scheme, now armed with information about how its residents were settling in.[13] The discussion, chaired by the RIBA's vice-president John Michael Austin-Smith, circled primarily around the sociological and community-oriented aspects of the estate's design. Austin-Smith concluded with the declaration that Womersley and his team deserved 'the highest possible congratulations for taking such a bold concept and following it through to completion over a period of ten years'.[14]

Fig. 1. *Park Hill, Sheffield, Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith, completed in 1961, photograph of 1969 by Bill Toomey (RIBA Collections)*

The innovative street decks that materialised for the first time at Park Hill have remained central to the estate's status in both architectural culture and popular discourse. In their classic 1994 study of modern public housing in Britain, Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius described the estate as Womersley's 'most spectacular scheme', and in 1998 English Heritage acknowledged its 'international importance' with Grade II* listed status.[15] The estate is in the process of a controversial redevelopment by Urban Splash (the first phase of which was completed in 2011), for which the phrase 'streets in the sky' has figured prominently in the marketing material with the approval of Ivor Smith.[16] In this process, however, the street decks have been narrowed to create larger apartments.[17]

The estate has continued to attract much attention, but also debate, from historians. Some have framed it primarily as a project of radical modernity. According to Matthew Hollow's study of 2010, its architects 'shunned nostalgic cosiness' in favour of a new functionalism with novel sociological priorities.[18] Sam Wetherell's 2020 account presents Park Hill as a part of a 'vision of developmental modernity' in post-war estate-building, focusing on the novelty of its central heating system, though he notes more broadly that this was a vision in British council housing from which many people were excluded.[19] Joe Moran, in contrast, characterised the scheme in 2012 as preoccupied

with reconstructing the past, specifically the 'traditional' street-based working-class life of earlier decades, a strategy which Moran deemed of precarious viability in the face of post-war social change.[20] Strikingly absent from published scholarship is a critical appraisal of what has become a central aspect of the estate's mythology: the purported attempt by the designers to preserve a local community. As a consequence, today Park Hill's claims to progressive politics are frequently taken at face value.[21] Owen Hatherley, for example, saw the estate as 'an overwhelming reminder of what [Sheffield] once wanted to be — the capital of the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' (in doing so conflating the 1950s, when Park Hill was conceived, with a moniker of the late 1970s).[22]

This article shows that the social objective of the project was not to reconstruct an existing working-class community, but to create a new one. Park Hill's 'streets in the sky' did not derive from the local area's pre-existing morphology, nor its residents from the site's original inhabitants. Instead of reviving a working-class past, the aim was to obliterate the 'criminal' community that had lived on the site and to replace it with one that was 'respectable'. In this way, Park Hill represents an architectural vision that teetered between modernity and nostalgia. Its designers were invested in constructing a new, idealised community by drawing on a highly qualified version of history.

Such attempts to shape working-class community life at Park Hill indicate the limits to the supposed political radicalism of the British welfare state, even during the apparent apex of 'social-democratic' political influence. Jon Lawrence has observed that 'paternalism was written into the fabric of the new welfare state', a proposition that should serve as a 'corrective to accounts of Britain's embrace of modernity'.[23] With specific reference to British architect-planners in the post-war period, Otto Saumarez Smith has noted that beneath 'an outward veneer of radical futurism, [their] plans often reveal a surprising degree of uneasy conservatism'.[24] Jose Harris characterised the British welfare state as an extension of an inherited liberal-paternalist model of social security, based on concepts of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, rather than a radical socialist universalism.[25] All of these characteristics can be seen at Park Hill.

THE ORIGINS OF PARK HILL'S STREET DECKS

A Yorkshireman by birth, Lewis Womersley trained at the Huddersfield School of Architecture. He served as borough architect for Northampton immediately after the second world war. In 1953, after just seven years in public service, he became city architect of Sheffield.[26] His ambitious approach to post-war reconstruction was recognised early on. He was named as one of the *Architects' Journal*'s 'Men of the Year' in 1953, and a decade later the president of the RIBA, Robert Matthew, would describe him as 'outstanding'.[27] During his period of office, Sheffield underwent profound reconstruction. This included major slum clearance, the rebuilding of the university and the construction of a new retail complex in the city's old market area.[28] Womersley was also a member of the Parker Morris committee, which in 1961 published the report *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*, setting new space standards for public housing to facilitate higher standards of living for council tenants.[29] After leaving Sheffield in 1964, Womersley set up a private architecture practice with Hugh Wilson in Manchester and there led the design of the controversial Hulme Crescents scheme, which like
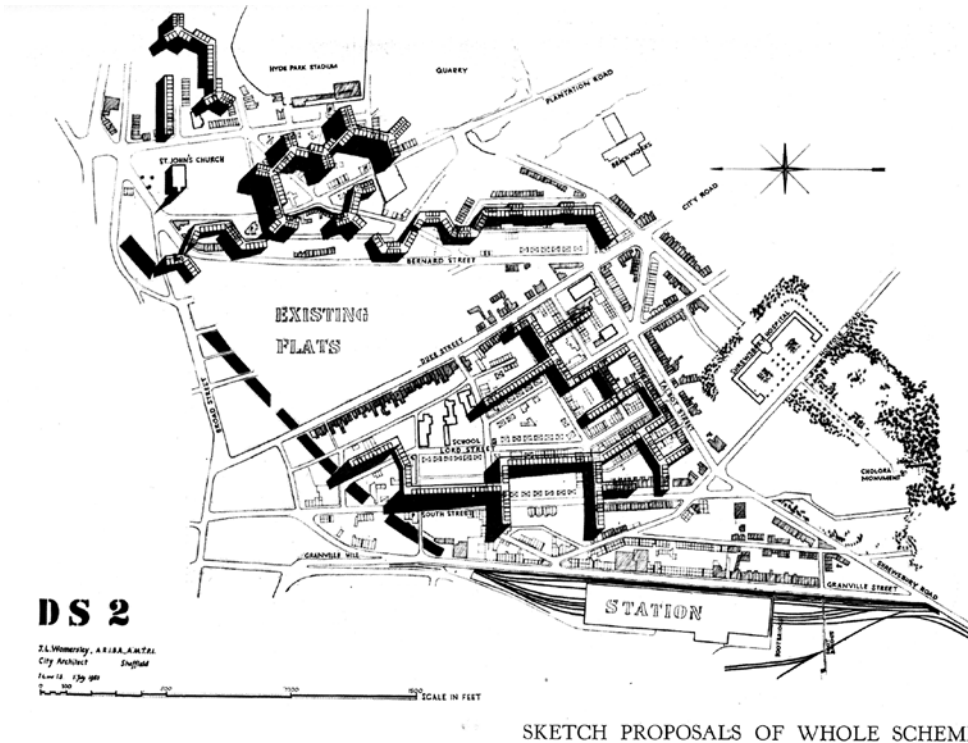
SKETCH PROPOSALS OF WHOLE SCHEME

Fig. 2. J. L. Womersley, Park Hill, Sheffield, site layout plan of 1953 (Sheffield Local Studies Library)

Park Hill incorporated deck access.[30] Following his death in 1990, an obituary in the *Independent* described him as a man who 'vigorously supported the move towards a more egalitarian society'.[31] In the *Sheffield Telegraph* he was recognised for his 'particular talent for spotting and nurturing able and innovative young architects', running his office on the principle of group practice, 'more like an atelier than the conventional local government department'.[32]

Park Hill was the pinnacle of Womersley's career, for which he was awarded the RIBA Bronze Medal and a Ministry of Housing and Local Government award.[33] He first proposed a multi-storey development for the Park Hill clearance site to the city's housing committee in March 1955, in a design that drew on the findings of a recent European tour of inspection undertaken by himself and members of Sheffield's housing committee. To investigate the viability of building vertically, the deputation visited and compared multi-storey housing at forty-three schemes in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Switzerland.[34] They concluded that multi-storey building (by which they meant buildings of more than two storeys) would be highly appropriate for the Park Hill site, an area with the oldest outstanding slum clearance orders in the city. Central to Womersley's proposal was the architectural innovation of street decks:
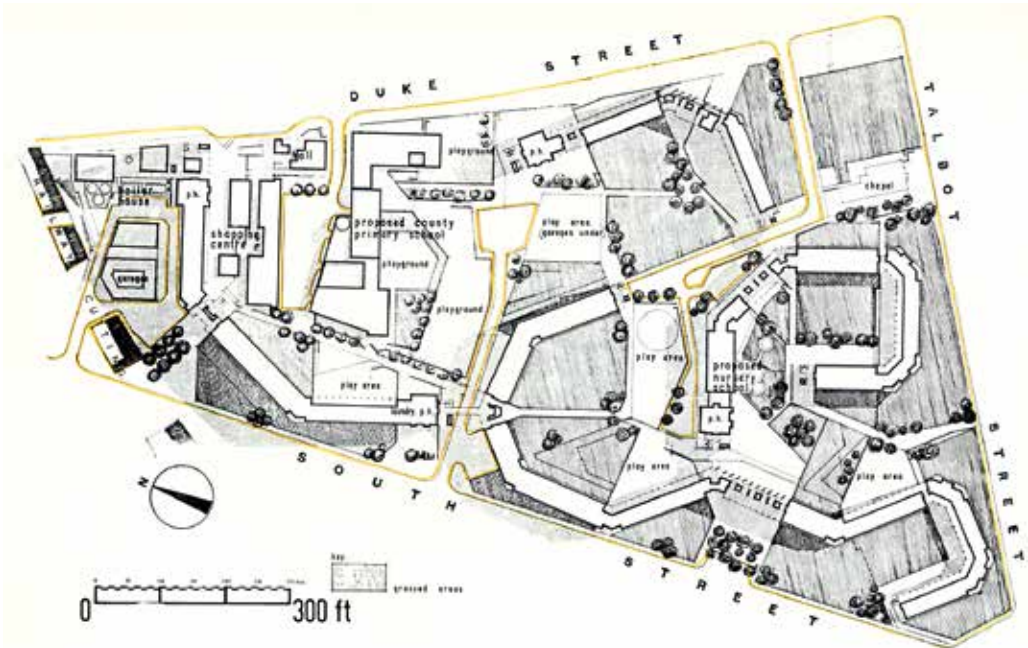
Fig. 3. *Park Hill, Sheffield, site layout from* Official Architecture and Planning, *29, no. 2, 1966, p. 226 (Alexandrine Press)*

> A new system of access by street decks has been designed which, it is felt, is particularly adapted to the City's topography. The decks, off which the front doors to the dwellings open, are […] much more commodious than the normal balcony and fulfil the function of 'streets' within the building along which prams can be pushed and milk trolleys wheeled.[35]

Deck access had been the ground-breaking feature of the Smithsons' entry to the Golden Lane competition of 1952.[36] While the competition was won by Geoffry Powell (later of Chamberlin, Powell & Bon), the Smithsons attracted much attention for their reimagining of Le Corbusier's '*rue intérieure*' as an elevated (and open-air) 'street' many metres above the ground.[37] The appeal of pedestrianised walkways in the sky spoke both to post-war concerns about the erosion of community life and the challenge of traffic posed by expanded car ownership, as later vividly crystallised in Colin Buchanan's *Traffic in Towns* (1963).[38] The effort to recreate the historic sociability of the terraced street within the multi-storey slab block template was pivotal to the Team X breakaway from the functionalist modernism of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) initiated in 1953, in which the Smithsons played a leading part.[39]

This burgeoning interest in deck access was developed more concretely by the architects of Park Hill. Jack Lynn, a miner's son who trained as an architect at King's College, Durham (the alma mater of the Smithsons), had worked briefly at Coventry City Council.[40] Influenced by his Methodist upbringing, he believed in architecture as a means of social improvement and was described in his obituary in the *RIBA Journal* as a

'Crusader for decent homes for working people'.[41] Ivor Smith trained at the Bartlett (while it was evacuated to Cambridge) then the Architectural Association (AA), and later in his career attracted wide praise and attention for his work as professor of architecture at University College Dublin.[42] Deck access had been a feature of earlier unrealised designs by Lynn and Smith for different projects.[43] Lynn, in collaboration with the Newcastle architect Gordon Ryder, incorporated deck access into his own entry to the Golden Lane competition.[44] Straight after, Lynn worked with Smith at the AA on a thesis proposal for a multi-storey redevelopment along the south bank of the River Thames in Rotherhithe, a study that Lynn described as 'instrumental' to their recruitment by Womersley in 1953.[45] 'Such was our confidence,' Smith recalled in 2008, '(or our arrogance) that at our interview we made a condition: that we should work together.'[46] The Smithsons' ideas were significant for them. Reflecting on the development of the design for Park Hill in the *RIBA Journal* in 1962, Lynn noted that the Smithsons' Golden Lane proposal for 'street access' was important insofar as it 'made the first moves towards their continuity by creating street corner junctions where refuse chutes would be located, which they likened to the modern equivalent of the village pump'.[47]

Joe Moran has situated 'streets in the sky' as part of a broader cultural preoccupation with the street that was emerging in the post-war era. He charted the rise of a 'quasi-surrealist interest in the quotidian', with a high-water moment in the late 1950s.[48] The romantic appeal of the street, especially in use by children, was celebrated in the photography of Nigel Henderson and Roger Mayne in London (from 1949 to 1954 and 1956 to 1961 respectively) and Shirley Baker in Manchester (from 1961 to 1981). This interest informed the understanding of community promoted by the sociologists Michael Young, Peter Townsend and Peter Willmott at the Institute of Community Studies (ICS), which they founded in Bethnal Green, London, in 1953.[49] Young and Willmott's 1957 book *Family and Kinship in East London* contended that the 'traditional' squalor-ridden conditions in the slums of Bethnal Green had contributed towards the shaping of a uniquely communitarian and neighbourly way of life for its working-class residents — a kinship model in danger of extinction in the course of slum clearance and dispersal to new suburbs.[50] Amid a boom in sociological literature on slum clearance, similar concerns were echoed by other scholars such as John Mogey in his study on Oxford (1956), Vere Hole on Clydeside (1960) and Hilda Jennings on Bristol (1962).[51]

These anxieties about working-class community life fed into architectural culture.[52] In a lecture in 2008, Smith recalled that *Family and Kinship* was crucial to 'the sense of social purpose and the vision' of his contemporaries.[53] The concept of the street as a site for community cohesion especially appealed to Smith and Lynn. In his 1965 essay, 'Sheffield', Lynn noted the conviviality that he saw in the Park area (the site of the estate), praising 'the essential gregariousness of the people'; he noted that 'the way this depended on the open air spaces around the front doors was made even more clear during the Coronation celebrations of that year [1953] when the unit of collective participation was everywhere in the street'.[54] Park Hill was promoted as a project that would recreate the 'traditional' virtues of slum communities without their squalid conditions. In his 1955 report, Womersley described it as 'a modern redevelopment of an outworn area which will provide for all the various ancillary activities which grew up naturally in the old area'.[55] With reference to the former Park area, Smith later

observed: 'The houses were so close together that the sun could hardly penetrate. Yet for all the hardships (and perhaps because of them) there was great neighbourliness; despite the dirt and closeness, people took a certain pride in their houses, and most of them wished to go on living in the same locality.'[56] In his 'Sheffield' essay, Lynn drew a similar conclusion: 'It was obvious that despite the evils arising out of a lack of proper water supply, sanitation and ventilation, here was a structure of friendliness and mutual aid which had somehow to be salvaged from the demolition.'[57]

Lynn and Smith's first 1953 design for the estate proposed to replicate the site's old residential pattern by overlaying new, orthogonal multi-storey complexes on the footprint of the original buildings (Fig. 2).[58] This scheme used striking right angles — 'borrowed from the Ville Radieuse', as Smith later put it — but it had to be revised to fan out more flexibly at the complex's joining points.[59] Smith explained: 'We struggled to design a right-angled corner that would avoid overlooking, not involve a fire hazard across the corner, and not give very large corner dwellings.'[60] The final scheme had corners of 112.5 and 135 degrees, akin to the Smithsons' Golden Lane proposal: the building, in Smith's words, 'meanders down the hill' in a more organic undulation (Fig. 3).[61] Nevertheless, Park Hill's final design was still 'consciously aimed at reproducing the quality of the traditional English street with all it means by way of social contact', in the words of its management.[62]

The final scheme recycled the area's former street names for the new decks — Norfolk Row, Gilbert Row and Long Henry Row — a matter which was subject to much hand-wringing during the planning phase.[63] It caused friction between Womersley as city architect and Henry Foster as city engineer, as made clear in a series of terse exchanges over several months in their correspondence records. In one letter of 29 April 1959, Foster referred to a point of stalemate: 'You will, no doubt, remember that I said I do not like the name "Decks" and since then we have not made any progress.'[64] In another letter dated 8 August 1959, Foster chastised Womersley for suggesting naming one deck 'Stafford Row' at a meeting of the housing management committee without consulting him: 'The name "Stafford Row" is so phonetically similar to Stafford Road as to be likely to lead to one being confused with the other. Perhaps in the event of similar circumstances arising in the future affecting the allocation of postal addresses to buildings it would be best to let me see your proposals unofficially first so that I could point out any difficulties of this kind. Street naming is full of snags.'[65] A further suggestion by Womersley that the decks might be named 'Rhodes Row or Lord Row' was dismissed in no uncertain terms by Foster, who underlined this passage on Womersley's letter and wrote beside it: 'NO!'[66] These lengthy deliberations indicate the importance ascribed to the 'streets in the sky', in all their minutiae.

When Park Hill was completed, promotional material produced by Sheffield City Council placed great emphasis on the role of the street decks in fostering community spirit and offered proof of success through the evocative photographs of thriving social life taken by Roger Mayne (Figs 4 and 5).[67] These images had much the same visual tenor as Mayne's celebrated shots eulogising the slums of London's Southam Street, similarly foregrounding the spontaneity of street-based interactions and children's play.[68] The sociological virtues of the decks were widely proclaimed in the architectural press. The *Architects' Journal*, praising the estate's 'fresh approach', highlighted the deck-access

Fig. 4. *and* Fig. 5. *Park Hill, Sheffield, street deck, photograph by Roger Mayne from* Park Hill: An Urban Community, c. *1961, pp. 14, 15 (Mary Evans Picture Library)*

system as 'its biggest success […] the virtues of social contact, which existed in the old streets of back-to-back houses, have been retained'.[69] In the *Architectural Review*, Banham, who had been a fellow member with the Smithsons of the Independent Group, asserted that '[f]unctionally and sociologically [the decks] are streets without the menace of through vehicular traffic', confirming his previously published contention that 'Park Hill looks like a piece of architectural community-building that is going to work out'.[70]

FORGING A NEW CONSTITUENCY

In the autumn of 1959, Sheffield's local media were abuzz with coverage of the opening of the first part of Park Hill. The two largest local papers, the *Star* and the *Sheffield Telegraph*, showed particular interest in the estate's very first tenants, Fred and Helen Jackson, who were previously residents of a house on Duke Street that was demolished under a compulsory purchase order to make way for the new estate.[71] Fred Jackson told the *Star* that 'it will just be a question of moving across the road from their old home to the new one'.[72] The implication was that the Park Hill project was committed to community reconstruction through direct residential transfer.

In 1956, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government recommended that 'the strongest efforts' should be made to resettle households from slum areas with their original neighbours.[73] Young and Willmott took pains to emphasise that, during slum clearance, the '[m]ovement of street and kinship groupings as a whole, members being transferred together to a new setting, would enable the city to be rebuilt without squandering the fruits of social cohesion'.[74] This concern was mirrored in contemporary debates about 'suburban neurosis', a term first coined by Stephen Taylor in 1938.[75] A syndrome typically associated with women moving to new estates in the inter-war period, this kind of 'neurosis' was attributed to the feelings of isolation, loneliness and anxiety that could follow from being displaced away from the communities of their former neighbourhoods.[76] In the 1950s and 1960s, in the context of a post-war housing drive that produced a wave of new estates both inside and outside of city centres, the concept was revisited in the sociological work of David Riesman, H. E. Bracey and Josephine Klein.[77] Park Hill's designers paid lip service to these same anxieties. Lynn later stated that the 'initial scheme was carefully programmed for the simultaneous development of both parts so that the least number of people would need to be moved out of the area to enable a start to be made and the great majority of the local residents could be housed without leaving the district at all'.[78] Without such measures, there were concerns that 'the community structure would be irrevocably upset'.[79]

These ideas have had considerable discursive currency in popular narratives about Park Hill. When the architect and academic Patrick Nuttgens was interviewed for BBC Radio in 1986, he emphasised such efforts as indicative of Park Hill's capacity to foster a community ethos:

> Well the major thing it had was that — and again people — there's a lot of argument about this — I was talking to a clergyman the other day who'd been there some time and he doesn't agree with it — he said that when Park Hill was built, they took the people from the old streets, on the hillside there, renamed the — er — the walkways, they're huge, fourteen feet

wide, sort of roads in the air — renamed them as the names of the old streets and put people back in the streets where they'd come, so to speak. Except now they were in the air, instead of on the ground. Now, people still argue as to whether that actually in practice happened, but if it did, then that was a major thing because there was already a semi-existing community, and that is certainly something people picked up right from the very beginning.[80]

This news report hints at the complex relationship that existed between representation and truth in relation to Park Hill. The transfers of tenure during the opening of the estate were more complicated than Nuttgens described: the story of Fred and Helen Jackson may have been attractive to the local media, but they were by no means representative of the majority of Park Hill's tenants.

Lynn's initial commitments to community transfer did not withstand later discussions. By the time the scheme was submitted to the council, the proposal to rehouse local residents directly into the estate had been set aside. Instead, each site within the complex was developed as a separate building contract, meaning that the majority of the existing properties had to be flattened in totality and their occupants rehoused before building commenced.[81] During the 1963 appraisal of Park Hill at the RIBA, an architect working for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government's research section, John Bartlett, asked whether the tenants were people from the original area or new occupants entirely.[82] The assistant estate manager, Joan Demers, replied that 'something like 40 per cent were already living on the site in clearance property; another 45 or 50 per cent came from another clearance area in another part of the city, quite close also to the city centre; and the remaining small percentage — 10 or 15 per cent — were off the housing list, or what were called pre-tenancy exchanges'.[83]

Yet that approximation appears to have been an untrue. According to a survey of households that Demers conducted the previous year, only twenty-two per cent of a sample of 197 had originally lived in the Park area.[84] A later study, by Chris Bacon of the University of Sheffield's Town and Regional Planning Department, indicates that the figures Demers quoted to the RIBA were exaggerated.[85] Based on an examination of slum clearance records from the Housing Department, Bacon judged any effort to preserve existing communities from the neighbourhood 'an outright failure'.[86] He found that 512 households were moved from Sheffield's slum clearance areas to Park Hill, occupying only fifty-two per cent of the available dwellings on the new estate. Bacon's report indicates that certainly no more than a quarter, at the highest, of Park Hill's first residents came from the original Park area. The proportion could have been as low as twelve per cent. They were outnumbered, in fact, by households coming from the Netherthorpe area on the opposite side of the city.[87] Overall, 922 households were moved during the Park site's slum clearance; they were relocated to at least twenty-one different estates across the city. In total, sixteen streets and twelve courts were demolished in the Park area, and their occupants were dispersed across up to 229 streets around Sheffield.[88]

Nor was this dispersal an accident. While the Ministry of Housing and Local Government had recommended that families should be moved with their neighbours as a general rule, its 1956 pamphlet made an exception for 'unsatisfactory families': 'It is a mistake to rehouse too many problem families in one street. They generally have a bad

effect upon each other and they will almost inevitably cause discomfort and resentment amongst their neighbours.'[89] The old Park area was perceived as an insalubrious district of Sheffield. In his 1965 essay, Lynn stated of these neighbourhoods: 'During the 1920's and 30's [*sic*] they were the breeding grounds of terrorism and vicious gang warfare which was broken up only by a vigorous combination of Police action and slum clearance programmes.'[90] Foster, the city engineer, stated in 1956 that the 'undesirable features' of Sheffield's living conditions were 'in the main […] the result of the activities of its inhabitants'.[91] Reflecting on the clearance of the Park area, Lynn used a striking simile: 'It was as if a social wound had been cauterized.'[92] Reyner Banham, after recovering from having his 'ears pinned back pretty forcefully about Park Hill by the Young Turks in City Architect's office who were designing it' in the mid-1950s, later looked back on the community element of the scheme with a more critical eye than in his early appraisals.[93] In his article 'Park Hill Revisited' for the American magazine *Architecture Plus* in 1974, Banham noted that

> the use of the word community touches a monster irony about Park Hill. It is no secret that one of the City's main motives for building Park Hill was to destroy — I mean that, destroy — the local community. There was a well-known and well-studied body of persons living on the lower Park Hill slopes whose outstanding characteristic was the highest rate of criminality in Britain, and the City simply decided to extirpate them, and destroy their lairs.[94]

These later assessments by Bacon and Banham have been overlooked in the literature and in received ideas about Park Hill. Yet it is evident that the inhabitants of the Park area were not regarded with the same warmth as the slum dwellers of Bethnal Green were by the ICS. Park Hill was not a project designed to reconstruct a community; rather it sought to forge a more 'respectable' social constituency — a sanitised facsimile — in its place.

A SANITISED VERSION OF THE PAST

Park Hill's 'streets in the sky' reportedly secured the approval of Peter Willmott, who had been so vocal in warning about the social consequences of new-build estates. Speaking on BBC Radio Sheffield in 1986, Patrick Nuttgens recounted 'going around with a sociologist from London who had done a major study of Bethnal Green, this must have been 'round about '64, '65, something of that sort, and we were absolutely clear that the residents really liked it'.[95] There is no mention in Michael Young's papers of any visit to Park Hill, but there is a reference in the diaries of Phyllis Willmott (another ICS researcher) to a visit that she made to the 'Sheffield flats' with her husband Peter in 1963.[96] In her diary entry for 5 September 1963, Phyllis Willmott recorded a positive reaction to the project and specifically to the street decks: 'The "decks" looking as if they work, as they were meant to, like pavements outside terrace housing. With a little more of the slumminess of such places.'[97]

However, Phyllis Willmott's journey through the industrial north was not made with unqualified enthusiasm. She explained: 'I was not too keen to see anything except perhaps the Sheffield flats, but agreed to start towards Harrogate since that seemed equally as one way to the general southerly direction.'[98] She was relieved finally to
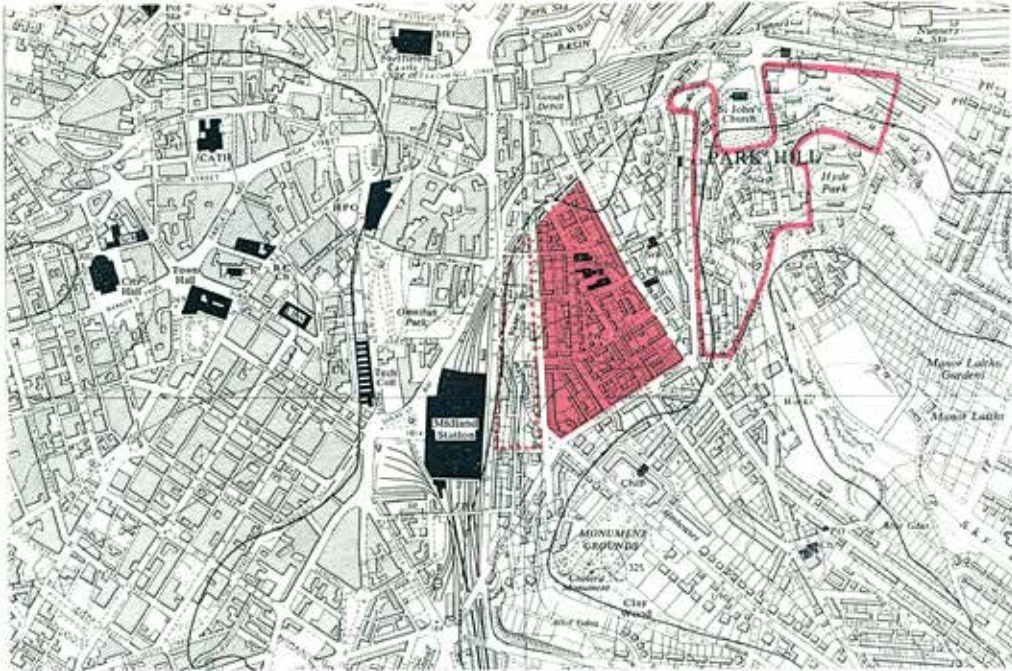
Fig. 6. *Map of Sheffield showing the location (in solid red) of the Park Hill site,*
from Official Architecture and Planning, *29, no. 2, 1966, p. 224; the red outline indicates*
the location of Hyde Park estate, also designed by Lynn and Smith, completed in 1965
and demolished in 1992–93 (Alexandrine Press)

reach Park Hill: 'The Sheffield flats turned out being the things I was <u>wanting</u> [original emphasis] to see — interesting, stark and drafty.'[99] Her comment reveals a persistent and salient undercurrent running through appraisals of Park Hill in the 1950s and 1960s: the notion that the estate could represent a stable and unthreatening mode of working-class living. The complexity and dissonance of urban poverty in the north of England left Willmott feeling uneasy: she complained that the 'shock' of seeing the 'soot black' cities left her mind 'littered like an untidied room'.[100] Park Hill, by contrast, represented the vision she had been '<u>wanting</u>' to see in patterns of working-class social life.

When Park Hill opened, a solitary note of discord was struck by the Town and Country Planning Association. They sniffed at its architects' 'naive and unwarranted assumption[s]' about community, which they saw as grounded in 'bogus sociology'.[101] In the 1970s, the methodologies of the ICS came under increased scrutiny, notably in Jennifer Platt's highly critical 1971 study.[102] Banham reflected that he and his contemporaries might have benefited from being more critical of the sociological vogue in the 1950s. In *New Society* in 1973, he looked back on the early certainty that the decks at Park Hill 'promote those patterns of "community" that I, like the rest of my generation, had swallowed whole from those great myth-makers of our time, Willmott and Young'.[103] In *Architecture Plus* in 1974, Banham recalled the conviction that 'the decks
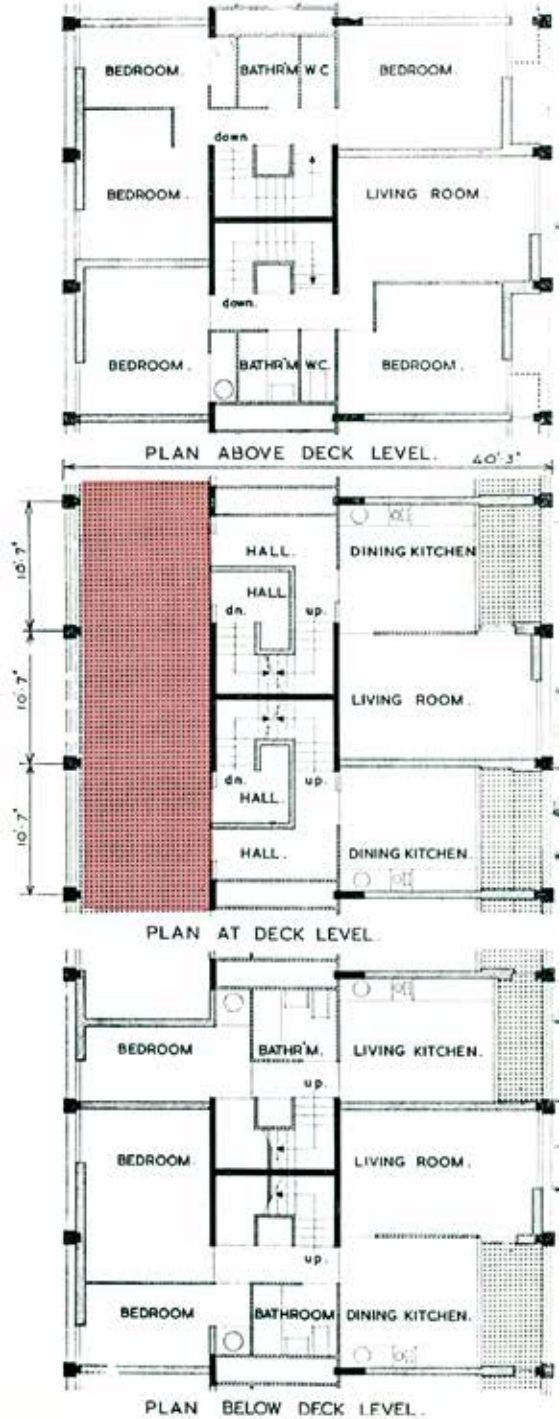
would promote those patterns of healthy community relationships that my generation was happy to impute to traditional working-class streets, after a hurried reading of Young and Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* […] a book from which neither architecture nor sociology has fully recovered in Britain, twenty years later'.[104]

These criticisms of the approach of the ICS have been reinforced by historians who have reanalysed original interview transcripts. Jon Lawrence has revealed that the use of interview data in the final publication was highly selective, giving a wilfully misleading representation of suburban malaise to romanticise contrasting styles of slum living. His conclusion was unequivocal: 'if *Family and Kinship in East London* was powerful politics, it was poor sociology'.[105] Young himself later conceded that their depictions of working-class cohesion in the slums of Bethnal Green were exaggerated: 'we probably did overdo it […] in one respect or another, we were biased'.[106]

In his 1985 report for the University of Sheffield, Chris Bacon highlighted that the Park area before slum clearance consisted not of the straightforward pattern of parallel streets that Park Hill's system of deck access sought to emulate, but rather of courts.[107] Park residents lived primarily in back-to-back, three-storey houses clustered around courts of varying layouts and sizes, without the private yards or WCs of rows of terraced housing along bye-law streets (Fig. 6).[108] This created a residential pattern that was less consistent and more complex than the rows of two-storey housing along parallel terraced streets.[109] One of those present at the RIBA appraisal, T. A. Field, pointed out that the original housing form had been 'upset' and that 'people had been re-housed in a new building form'.[110] Smith and Womersley brushed this aside, with the latter retorting that his team 'had done an extraordinary amount of research on Park Hill, and they would be glad if lots of other people would do as much on their schemes'.[111]

Putting 'streets' in the sky also had physical consequences not anticipated by the architects. The street decks were positioned above the bedrooms of flats below, causing persistent noise issues (Fig. 7).[112] An early consultation of residents by Demers noted 'complaints about the noise on the decks over bedrooms' as a result of people walking above.[113] While Demers sought to play down the problem — insisting that such noise 'seems to be something which many accept as part of their lives' and that 'a few lonely old people have been glad to hear this, in spite of complaints about it, as they say they do not feel so isolated' — it provoked recurrent complaints and calls for the regulation of children's play.[114] One resident, interviewed in 1973, complained that 'there is no facilities for the children here in — at night-time […] and hence you get the, um, running up and down on the landings and things like this and it's quite a nuisance to the elderly people here. And myself, I'm quite annoyed about this noise at night, I mean it's really awful the noise, here.'[115]

Another tenant, Doreen Jackson, insisted: 'You get no real friendships […] You've to go out on the deck and it's not like standing on the door-step.'[116] This calls into question whether the specific structure of the bye-law street could be directly transposed into a built environment with a very different scale and density, simply by virtue of a system of deck access. The decks all faced east or north, and so did not get sun for most of the day. In his 2008 lecture, Smith acknowledged another 'major shortcoming' of Park Hill's 'streets in the sky' compared to the ground-level originals: a lack of windows to overlook the decks, which would have served to 'enrich both the dwelling and the

street'.[117] This element was incorporated more successfully, he conceded, in the Byker Wall project in Newcastle designed by Ralph Erskine (another participant in Team X), who formulated the design via tenant consultation.[118]

MANAGING A COMMUNITY

In 1946, the RIBA held a conference during which it was affirmed that, for architects, 'the Science of Social Studies provides the information needed to plan a community, whether a town, village or housing scheme'.[119] Park Hill was a consciously sociological project. Womersley attested to the RIBA during its 1963 appraisal that one of 'the most significant aspects of Park Hill' was the architects' foregrounding of concerns which were 'Environmental and Sociological', citing the 'inter-relationship of physical layout and community sense'.[120] Smith backed him up, emphasising that the estate's development team had approached decisions as self-styled 'amateur sociologists'.[121]

These commitments to sociology were, however, conditional. Sheffield City Council took a stern view of sociological surveys conducted by external figures. The minutes of the housing development and housing management committees for 1963 reveal an altercation between the council and Paul Ritter, an Australian academic from the Nottingham School of Architecture who was appointed chief planner for the city of Perth the following year.[122] In June 1963, the housing development committee received a request from Ritter to conduct a survey of tenants at Park Hill and the nearby Woodside estate but refused to give him permission, with no reason recorded.[123] In September, the chair of the housing management committee reported that Ritter's employees had been intercepted undertaking research without permission by the estate's housing manager, after which Ritter approached the town clerk and 'questioned the legality of the Committee's decision and had suggested that he might take action for libel and for damages arising from the interference with the work of his employees'.[124] The committee, when consulted, decided that 'investigations involving personal interviews with the tenants at Park Hill should now be restricted so far as possible'.[125]

Demers was crucial to the estate's 'in-house' sociological mission. Prominent in estate life, she was invited to the lunch attended by a select group of guests for the estate's formal opening celebrations in 1961.[126] The seating plan shows her allocated to a table with prominent city councillors, just metres away from the leader of the opposition, Hugh Gaitskell.[127] She was present to answer questions from senior members of the RIBA at the 1963 appraisal, and photographs show her taking foreign guests on tours around Park Hill (Fig. 8).[128] Demers first appears in a 1959 report to the housing management committee, the recommendation of which was that she should be 'Assistant Superintendent', although this proposal was reconsidered and 'Superintendent' was crossed out on the typed report and 'Estate Manager' substituted in ink.[129] Smith described her as a 'skilled and sympathetic housing manager': the figure who 'sorted out [residents'] problems and made them feel at home'.[130] However, Demers's repeated use of the language of conscious community-building suggests that her purview went further than this. Her role was not just responsive; she was involved in actively engendering a 'respectable' community. Demers had been attracted to Park Hill because she was 'struck by the tremendous promise which the whole scheme

Fig. 8. *Joan Demers showing Inam Aziz, a newspaper editor from Pakistan, around Park Hill in 1965 alongside Sheffield's deputy housing officer, F. Codd (Picture Sheffield and Sheffield Libraries and Archives)*

appeared to hold […] where a real community could be developed as a conscious policy supported by a Local Authority'.[131] She stressed that residents 'need all possible support to help them achieve a high standard of community prride [*sic*] as possible. The Estate on its side must foresee and avert dangerous and socially disintegrating trends.'[132]

One attendee of the 1963 RIBA appraisal, George Richmond, commented to Park Hill's architects that he thought that 'the scheme tended to be alive because there was always someone there who represented the authority. Their presence also served to keep down damage by undesirables.'[133] The approach taken by Demers combined paternalism and self-help. In her 1960 'Sociological Report', she stated that 'there is much which can be done yet to help these people to "help themselves" […] making them aware of their responsibilities and of how they can help to foster a good spirit among themselves'.[134]

This attitude reflects a broader trend around the languages of feminine 'care' within public housing management, which had roots in the operation of voluntary associations and private philanthropy in the nineteenth century, particularly in Octavia Hill's moralistic style of housing management. When Hill died in 1912, her methods and training techniques were in use in Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh and even Continental Europe.[135] The Octavia Hill method was fundamentally paternalistic

— or, more specifically, maternalistic. Hill highlighted female housing managers as particularly effective conduits for the application of moralising codes.[136] The deployment of female housing managers facilitated more intimate intrusions in the lives of tenants, as reflected in numerous government directives for female intervention in the mid-century.[137] Women also often occupied roles as public health visitors during the inter-war period up to the 1960s: the woes of 'problem families' were often attributed to the deficiencies of mothers.[138]

The assessments of tenants' behaviours in social spaces by Park Hill's management resound with a paternalistic, condescending language of 'respectability'. The city's housing department praised the moderation and responsibility displayed by tenants at the new purpose-built bars in 1961: 'Mention […] must be made of the pubs, which are restful, tastefully furnished and being so well conducted are an asset to the Estate.'[139] Park Hill in fact lacked the same range of pubs as had featured in the previous neighbourhood: the former Park area had eight pubs, whereas the new estate had just four. Demers employed similar codings of 'respectability' when criticising the aimless 'loitering' of teenagers around the estate's café in 1960: 'A coffee bar on the site is responsible for gathering together a good many of the less desirable types of adolescents, from a wide area, who create unnecessary noise and disturbance and generally finish their evening loitering on the decks or in the lifts.'[140]

Demers was also anxious about the ability of the tenants to manage their finances in the face of new temptations. 'Canvassers of varying kinds have been a nuisance all the time,' she complained. 'It is not possible to say yet if many housewives have been cajoled into buying articles which they can ill afford, and which a family financial crisis might make an impossible burden.'[141] Similarly, Womersley told the Parker Morris committee in 1961 that he was worried about council tenants' capacity 'to ward off the temptations of leisure', such as television, which 'we can easily imagine […] destroying family life'.[142] Womersley was one of a number of architects and planners across Britain who by the 1960s were becoming concerned by the burgeoning challenges posed by 'affluence' for designing new urban forms.[143] In this, they were echoing concerns being aired contemporaneously by a range of figures on the political left.[144] The historian Selina Todd has emphasised the limits of 'affluence' in 1950s and 1960s Britain: poverty and precarity continued to dictate and shape working-class experiences.[145] However, new consumer durables did percolate into many working-class homes.[146] 'The challenge today,' Womersley insisted, 'is not to remain sufficiently healthy to earn a living and keep out of the poor house but to learn to develop one's talents so that ever-increasing leisure hours may be used profitably and not frittered away in idleness and mischief. The present day challenge may well prove to be the more difficult of the two.'[147]

CONCLUSION

This study has considered the design, formative influences and initial management strategy of the Park Hill estate, concentrating on the period of its construction and opening; it is not an assessment of residential experience, which went through significant, complex change during the following decades of its occupancy. Park Hill attracted virulent debate by the late 1970s, when the estate came to be seen as an 'area of worst deprivation' amid

national anxiety about urban malaise.[148] Throughout this time, however, characterisations of the high-minded initial idealism of its designers have persisted as part of the estate's essential mythology and, if anything, have been strengthened by the melancholy contrast with its ultimate 'decline'.[149] This makes for a rhetorically compelling story, but one that is balanced precariously on a considerably more complicated history.

Park Hill may have been an innovative feat of modernist architecture, but it was not a site of radically progressive politics; we must not read the former as a cipher for the latter. Its goal was not to strengthen the site's original constituency, as has been claimed and often repeated, but to replace it in order to incubate a model example of working-class community. The 'streets in the sky', which have defined Park Hill in architectural discourse, were not a recreation of an existing local urban layout. They were formulated within, and imported from, an alternative metropolitan architectural culture in London, and specifically Bethnal Green.

Over the past decade, a developing historiography within modern British history has done much to reassert how a history of Britain might be 'told through the transformation of its built environment'.[150] Park Hill offers a rich archival seam through which to interrogate the history of the British welfare state. Digging into archival material affords novel insights — pushing away from familiar narratives that have repeatedly rattled over the same tracks — and encourages more careful, critical consideration of the estate's radical claims. Park Hill offers a stark case study of the acutely parochial visions that could underpin projections of 'community' and working-class 'respectability' within the post-war welfare state and its architectural culture.

BIOGRAPHY

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