Brutalism, a utopian ideology or dystopian disaster?

1960s Britain was a time of change, the post war era was synonymous with change austerity and poverty, but it was coming to an end, it gave way to a new-found optimism with a belief of creating a better country. It was a period of rapid growth and staggering transformation. A mass rebuilding effort of social housing was beginning, the utopian future, architecture that reflected the socio-political landscape of 1960s Britain. Rising from the ashes of Victorian row houses, emerged 13 towering storeys of raw concrete and mortar, lined with ‘streets in the sky’, a statement of the new-found optimism in the country. This was Britain’s controversial introduction to Brutalism, Sheffield’s Park Hill.

Yet, the era was a turbulent time, the gulf in society was becoming ever more present, the Profumo Affair resulted in huge mistrust of political leaders and mass riots and anti-war protests were rife. Brutalist architecture was a manifestation of 1960s ideal, however, often what was promised was short lived, as crime and anti-social behaviour begun to thrive in these environments. Often an environment designed for the least well off, it ultimately failed them. Council budgets cut resulting in little maintenance meant the residents were left to their own devices. Come 2017, many brutalist towers are being demolished or renovated, such as Park Hill, a process of gentrification. All one sees is grey concrete and graffiti, forcing the residents out, often to the outskirts of the town. Yet, this goes completely against the optimistic ideals of the 60s. The architecture is not what failed, it is the political system that failed those trapped in an architectural experiment. Simply put, brutalism is a physical representation of the 1960s utopian ideologies. Ideologies, one could argue, that were flawed from the very beginning.
Brutalism is often a misunderstood, it was envisioned as the purest form of architecture, solid concrete and mortar, straight lines and repetitive geometry. The post-war period had allowed for cheap materials to be imported and transported with ease, removing the need to source construction materials locally. Concrete was cheap, and in abundance resulting in a construction boom of mass social housing, massive shopping centres replacing high streets (Birmingham), multi-storey car parks, universities and offices in a contentious style that would bring the UK into the modern era. Brutalism was extremely popular in the UK from the mid 1950’s to the 1970’s due to its cheap functionality, however, despite popular belief, the term brutalist architecture, does not mean brutal. Jonathan Foyle, of the World Monuments Fund Britain states that:

“It is damned by its name which comes from the French, béton brut, or raw concrete, but we use the same word [Brut] to describe Champagne and this perhaps sums up the dichotomy at the heart of this style.”

The architecture itself were often an architectural and social experiment, an experiment that has led to much of its criticism. Brutalist social housing in the UK often had a signature trademark, elevated walkways better known as ‘Streets in the sky’. Architects carried the best intentions and this design feature seemed like a good one, a place to socialise, a safe place for kids away from traffic. However, in the modern era, these estates harvested crime and social tension.

Despite these criticisms of the movement, one must appreciate the context in which the movement flourished. There was a new found hope to rebuild the country, yet, the country was reeling with austerity and shortage of housing. A solution was needed to provide these homes and build high and fast was the solution. Putting aside one’s taste of appearances and aesthetics, brutalist architecture has split political opinion and to answer the question of whether the movement failed, one must explore the political ramifications of policies following the Second World War. These graphs represent that context.

Fig. 1 &2 (Pettinger, 2017)

Take the Barbican Centre, a privately-owned estate, complete with vast swaths of raw concrete and mortar, repeatedly wins awards for ugliest building yet, to buy an apartment, one must splash £4 million. However, within walking distance of the conglomeration of corporate steel and glass of Canary

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Wharf, lies Robin Hood Gardens, an estate hated and victimised due to its portrayal in popular culture. The local council are committed to demolishing the estate and replacing the estate and replacing its 214 units of social housing with up to 1,575 new homes (Wiles, 2016), of which only a mere fraction will be deemed – affordable, which is a relative term. The Barbican, a private estate, with its own army of caretakers resulting in service charges from £1,700 to £16,000 is now seen as the pinnacle of middle class living, Robin Hood Gardens with its now demonised tenants is set to be replaced by vanity – Gentrification. This sums up the current government’s contempt for social housing.3

This contempt is what resulted in a tragedy that saw 71 people perish alive with no escape, some in their sleep. June 14th 2017, at 00:54 the first report of the fire was received by the fire service, it burned for 60 hours, 223 people escaped, 71 (including one stillbirth) died with a further 70 injuries. The cause of the fire was inconsequential, a faulty fridge-freezer, however, the catalyst for the devastating speed of the fire was poor quality cladding. 5

A renovation of Grenfell Tower had taken place between 2012-2016 because the residents of Kensington wouldn’t cope to look at a 1960’s block of social housing. The cause, reaction and continuing agony of survivors is bewildering and sickening. The renovation included new cladding of the exterior. Kensignton and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation specified the cheaper combustible option rather than the non-combustible option result in the savings of £293,368.6 An old

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saying, you can’t put a value on someone’s life doesn’t need apply here. Prior to the fire, the Grenfell Action Group, had been campaigning for better safety for the building and remarkably the council had threatened to the group with legal action in 2013 as the criticism had become “defamation and harassment”. The action group posted the following statement on their website following the tragedy.

Regular readers of this blog will know that we have posted numerous warnings in recent years about the very poor fire safety standards at Grenfell Tower and elsewhere in RBKC. ALL OUR WARNINGS FELL ON DEAF EARS and we predicted that a catastrophe like this was inevitable and just a matter of time. (Grenfell Tower Fire, 2017)

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is one of the wealthiest local authorities, not only in London, but the UK, with some of the world’s most expensive real estate resulting in the highest pay gap between rich and poor anywhere in the country. (London fire: A visual guide to what happened at Grenfell Tower, 2017)

In 2016, the council took £55 million in rent but only invested less than £40 million in council housing. (Mostrous, 2017)

So, with its wealth, one might expect the reaction of not only the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea but the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation as well, to coordinate an appropriate operation in terms of compensation, condolence and rehousing, nope, just further contempt. The short-term response was the allocation by the government of 68 newly built flats that would be used to rehouse those who had families displaced by the fire. Despite many poor offers and long term temporary housing, the shocking statistic by October 31st, three months after the disaster, only 26 out of the 203 households had been relocated in permanent housing. All because of a process known as gentrification.

This gentrification is happening all over the country, destroying brutalist architecture due what it represents to some, the idea of social housing in a city centre seems frowned upon by many these days. Yet demolishing them, replacing them with blocks that to some are just as horrid as with developers who pay the council to default the affordable housing requirement is utterly despicable. Councils pushing the original tenants out of the city centre to another consistency, often one on tighter budgets goes against the very ideology of the early optimists who wanted a better home for all, not the few.

Park Hill is currently undergoing renovation, having narrowly escaped demolition due to its controversial Grade II listing by English Heritage in 1998. But despite this, the estate has failed to escape gentrification. Undertaken by Urban Splash, 200 new flats will be made available for social rent, while the other 600 will be sold on the open market. Prices for a new two-bedroom flat was starting at £147,000 as of mid-2015. This price is well above the average in Sheffield and was called a form of “class cleansing” by architectural critic Owen Hatherley. Though some argue it is a positive development, it has ultimately pushed the existing residents out, going against the principles of the estate, which by default, renders that argument mute.

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No matter on one’s political stance, opinions on aesthetic, Brutalism was a utopian dream that peaked in the height of social mobility, it’s the politics that failed those living within the confinements of the concrete and mortar. Brutalist may have been a harsh way to deal with social housing, but at least they were thinking about it. From a personal point of view, I loathe brutalist social housing from an aesthetic stance, yet I couldn’t agree with the following statement anymore made by Sebastian Messer of The Independent.

Plans to demolish brutalist council estates will destroy concrete memorials to the post war commitment to social democracy - no wonder today’s politicians want to raise them to the ground. (Messer, 2016)
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Appendix

Figure 4.2 Housing Completions, UK, 1950-2010

Source: Housing Completions, 1950-2010, CLG.
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