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History of Modern London

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**Re-defining London Through Architecture: 1945-1970**

London experienced a housing crisis following the second World War. Much of the city's infrastructure had been destroyed by German bombs and what remained from the post-war period was a disorganized mess: the war had decimated London both physically and culturally. Over 3.5 million people had evacuated the city, and its effects were visible: roads were quieter, the industries less active, the populace weary from food rationing. Equally detrimental as its housing crisis, London had an identity crisis. The war had begun an ideological revolution: an uprooting of all the morals with which London had defined itself for the first half of the century. But for all the damage that it had been dealt, London had also been given a unique opportunity to rebuild physically and to redefine itself as a city. It is no surprise that in that period of rebirth much literature arose regarding the morality and the symbolic meaning of architecture. It was, at that time, the architects and the urban planners who were faced with the task of reimagining their city. It is the moral implications of that architectural reimagining with which this paper concerns itself.

British thought on urban planning evolved greatly between 1940 and 1970. In the midst of the war, in 1943, the London County Council put forth a plan for the reconstruction of London. The plan contained a comprehensive program by which the city would rebuild its parks, river front, residential buildings, industrial complexes, and communications infrastructure, thus "correcting [London's] natural evolutionary trends."[1] The idea of righting the city's course largely came from conceptions of pre-war London as a disorganized, uncontrolled organism, characterized by a

[1] John Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie, *County of London Plan* (London: Macmillan & Company, 1943), 3.

"chronic half-heartedness" in its construction of new properties.[2] The British government formally began to regulate the construction process in 1947 with the Town and Country Planning Act. This legislation established that ownership of land did not grant permission to develop it, and it consolidated the number of planning authorities from 1400 to 145. This act, along with the New Towns Act 1946, helped to realize the planning zones, such as the Green Belt and the suburban ring, that had been put forth in the original 1943 proposal by the London County Council.[3]

These documents were the first step in a reinvention of London that spanned from the 1940s well into the 1960s. One of the most important provisions in the LCC plan was that London separate its houses and its industry into well-defined spaces.[4] The LCC later supports this need for clear and functional spaces by citing a lack of architectural coherency as the primary reason for London's deficiencies.[5] In examining the motivations of the architects behind this plan, we see a clear desire on the part of the planners to rehabilitate some spirit that they saw in their city. Just as the weather gradually erodes a landscape, the natural passage of time, as viewed by the planners of the 1940s, eroded the character of a city. They saw that London, having been left largely on its own by the developers of the early twentieth century, had turned into a confused maze of disparate architectural structures. From the very first page, the authors lament a sickness that had taken their city, writing, "as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries grew more and more absorbed in gaining material prosperity, a tide of mean, ugly, unplanned building rose in every London borough and flooded outward."[6] This type of commentary, present throughout the plan, demonstrates a clear recognition of London's deteriorating physical identity.

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[2] Jerry White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and Its People* (London: Penguin, 2002), 4.
[3] *New Towns Act*, 9 & 10 GEO. 6. CH. 68, 1946
[4] Forshaw and Abercrombie, 3.
[5] Ibid., 5.
[6] Ibid., iii.

The notion of physical identity is but one component of a much larger identity, a spirit that London possesses. As we will see, the connections between architecture and definition form a deep and complex web, interwoven with ideas of movement, culture, and philosophy. Thus the physical deterioration perceived in the London County Council plan was in many ways indicative of and related to a very real deterioration of London's identity. When we look at the convoluted and neglected network of London's roads and infrastructure at the end of the 1940s, we can see that its physical aspect was in a position to be recreated. In terms of the other components of its identity, we will see that they were also in a state of disrepair. This idea will become clearer through an examination of the works of Thomas Sharp, an English urban planner and architectural critic who wrote at length about the relationship between physical city and its extra-physical identity. Although his primary subject was the university town of Oxford, about which he authored two books–*Oxford Replanned*, in 1948, and *Oxford Observed*, in 1952–Sharp believed that his methods of observation would hold good for any city.[7] Sharp's writings draw many connections between the intrinsic identity of a city and the public perception of it , as he constantly transitions between looking at Oxford as a living, breathing city to considering its implications to us as observers of Oxford.

In *Oxford Replanned*, Sharp alludes to the idea that people's carelessness in urban planning works to damage the character of a town. He points to the traffic congestion on Oxford's High Street as a great failure of the city's planning: the unending bustle and noise concealed the "atmosphere of philosophic, of collegiate calm" which had previously pervaded the town, rendering the true character of high street "invisible."[8] Sharp then transitions from this abstract space, where Oxford is alive, to discuss how people's perceptions of Oxford were degraded as well by the poor planning of the High Street.

[7] Thomas Sharp, *Oxford Observed* (London: Country Life, 1952), 9.
[8] Thomas Sharp, *Oxford Replanned* (London: Architectural Press, 1948), 21.

> To-day heavy traffic breaks up what once was an urban paradise into a crowd of islands surrounded by vehicular torrents. As a result the measured life of a university town…has ceased to exist, or exists in pockets as blitzed citizens exist in cellars.[9]

In this quotation from *Oxford Replanned*, Sharp considers the "measured life," or the public perception, of Oxford as a city. He holds that as the town itself becomes more and more disrupted physically, its measured character begins to deteriorate. For centuries, Oxford had both existed as a quiet town and been perceived as one, as Sharp laments. It is the introduction of traffic, a disruption of physical space, that for Sharp drastically affects his perception of the town.

A similar physical disruption occurred in London following World War II. As London expanded outward into the surrounding countryside, increasing its suburban area, it began to lose its individuality. The city was increasingly being perceived not as a unified entity but as a jumbled mess, indicating a great weakening of its character and identity. In a special edition of the Architectural Review titled "Outrage," English architectural critic Ian Nairn coined the term "subtopia" to refer to the seemingly infinite suburban spread of London after the war. By breaking down the barriers of time and space, industrialization, according to Nairn, furthered the process of conflating the English countryside into one continuous and sprawling town. The towns surrounding London gradually lost their individual identities as the wave of suburbanization removed their physical boundaries. "The end of Southampton will look like the beginning of Carlisle; the parts in between will look like the end of Carlisle or the beginning of Southampton," wrote Nairn.[10]

Like Sharp, Nairn also considers the city as both a living being and a perceived object. He claims that industrialization has disoriented the common man in relation to his environment, turning him against the protection of "unspoilt country" and training him to "tolerate every kind of abuse in

[9] Sharp, *Oxford Replanned*, 31.
[10] Ian Nairn, *Outrage* (London: Architectural Press, 1955), 365.

the name of public expediency."[11] Indeed, this appears to be bordering on a problem in the relationship between land developers and the citizens, and I would not like to discount that possibility, but this disorientation of the common man is also very closely related to the standardization of his surroundings. As the character of the areas surrounding London was flattened into an endless suburban landscape, the "villager became as much a commuter as a citizen."[12] Contrasting commuter with citizen, Nairn defines the experience of Londoners (as everyone in within fifty miles of London at that time seemed to be a Londoner) by their transience as much as their permanence. With no definable city to attach themselves to, Londoners floated through the city and its suburbs as commuters, because there was no longer a city of which to be a citizen.

The notion of a city's character finds itself as a recurring theme in the works of Sharp and Nairn. To Sharp, this character refers to a certain "aliveness" in a city, one that he is able to sense and, to some degree, interact with. He is most often concerned, in both *Oxford Replanned* and his later work *Town and Townscape* (1968), with the "preservation of character" in a given town as being fundamental to good urban planning.[13] Nairn rarely refers explicitly to the character of London and its suburbs, but it is an idea that he discusses much in the same ways as Sharp. He is consumed with the notion that the character of London–what he understands to be all that is London–is weakening and deteriorating due to the flattening of the English landscape. For both Sharp and Nairn, the character of a town serves as the medium by which its identity is experienced and consumed. Where a town possesses intrinsically its identity, the character is the outward facing component of that identity. Or in figurative terms, what the town *chooses* to put forward into the world. Therefore a weakening of character, of public perception, is akin to a deterioration of town identity.

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Thomas Sharp, *Town and Townscape* (London: Murray, 1968), 11.

Nairn continues his apocalyptic narrative and ties in the concept of ego to the human relationship with physical space, explaining how architectural standardization throughout London's suburbs was indicative of an intellectual and cultural numbing. Nairn claims that "the environment is an extension of the ego," and that twentieth-century man's attempts to consume all of that which England has to offer, to assert his humanity over the "indifferent wilderness," serve merely as a "measure of his own mediocrity."[14] As London began to lose its defining characteristics after the war, while simultaneously expanding further outwards, it became a massive but meaningless entity. As hard as it was to define the physical boundaries of London (as perceived, not by zoning) during the beginning of the 1950s, it was harder to define its philosophical boundaries. The city itself, along with its population, struggled to find an intellectual and cultural anchor point in their city. London's 1951 Festival of Britain, meant to rejuvenate the population after "years of austerity," instead "underlined London's loss of both opulence and confidence since the Great Exhibition a century before," wrote British historian Roy Porter.[15] It is not that London's identity was irreparably damaged, but rather that the part of its identity visible to the public, its character, had deteriorated so greatly that all sense of moral and ethical direction regarding London's future was lost.

It was at this time that London found itself in a unique position to reinvent itself. The city was at a low point, simply waiting for a spark that would reignite the good qualities that it still possessed. That spark came, at least for architecture and, in certain ways, philosophy and culture, in the form of the New Brutalism. The concept and architectural style, which attempted to confront "mass-production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work," was first proposed by English architects Alison and Peter Smithson in 1957.[16] The "brutality" of the style refers largely to the architects' choice of hard, plain, and unforgiving materials,

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[14] Nairn, *Outrage*, 367.
[15] Roy Porter, *London, a Social History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 344.
[16] Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, "Thoughts in Progress" *Architectural Design 27*, no. (April 1957): 113.

such as concrete and exposed steel beams. It was also conceived largely in response to the burgeoning International Style, which became very popular in Europe and the United States after the war. In moving between the frames of London as an agent and London as an object, I will show that London's choice to accept the New Brutalism, specifically in the construction of new housing, represented an active choice to define itself through honesty, objectivity, and a purity in its moral direction.

What brutalist architecture elicited from London, and what Londoners perceived in brutalist architecture, was that there was goodness to be found in its tendency towards standardization in post-war architecture. While Nairn had blamed the creation of a soulless "subtopia" on the uniform suburban sprawl emanating from London, it was that very endless landscape that allowed London to discover its appreciation of [objectivity and organization]. In his 1962 book *London Perceived*, British literary critic V.S. Pritchett writes:

> London conveys a sense of knowledge and experience. The city works hard but, unlike the Germans, we do not work because we can think of nothing else to do. We are not passionately competitive. We are cautious. We disapprove of the reckless plunge. We like to reflect on our interests…We are economical of means…We hate waste. The Londoner believes in timing.[17]

This sentiment stands in sharp contrast to the period of chronic disorganization in London before the war, but it is important to understand that a city can, over time, change its personality just as a person can. But to understand the ways in which the New Brutalism played into this picture of London that Pritchett paints, we must again conflate London and its population. In many ways, where London goes its population follows, and vice versa. For this reason, it becomes unimportant whether the city went first with brutalism or the people did. From the oppressive "subtopia" that

[17] V.S. Pritchett, *London Perceived* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), 29.

London initially became at the start of the 1950s, it was able to draw out, as Pritchett remarks, a sense of economy and determination to form a basis for a modern identity.

Brutalism is in many ways a product of that unique London experience. The New Brutalism, as proposed by the Smithsons, aimed to be "objective about 'reality'–the cultural objectives of society."[18] There were, according to critic Rayner Banham, three defining physical features of New Brutalism: a building should be "an immediately apprehensible visual entity; and that the form grasped by the eye should be confirmed by experience of the building in use…and this form should be entirely proper to the functions and materials of the building."[19] Brutalism was then, and is today, regarded primarily as an ethical style. Everything that is true physically about a brutalist building must also be true in its ethical statement: the concrete pillars are exposed and the walls are without facades, the building is honest; the structure is minimalist in its material usage, the building is economical; the steel beams and all that bears weight are visible, the building is hardworking and determined. All that was brutalism aligned with all that was London: the city's identity was mirrored in the ethics of the New Brutalism, and Londoner's perception of their city was matched by their experience of using brutalist buildings.

This adoption of the brutalist style began in earnest in the 1960s with the construction of new housing developments. The Golden Lane Estate was perhaps one of the first of these structures. Built in the City of London in 1957, the council housing project incorporates elements of modernism into its overall brutalist design, making it a curious mix of the two styles that would later define the modern era. The estate consists of several low-rises and a tower surrounding a central courtyard; each building contains a brick, glass, and concrete façade with splashes of bright red and yellow thrown in. In his 1964 book *Modern Buildings in London*, Ian Nairn describes the experience of

[18] Smithson and Smithson, 113.
[19] Reyner Banham, "The New Brutalism" *Architectural Design 118, no. (December 1955): 354.*

viewing the development: "you feel that the result is right even if your intellect can't see why."[20] This sense of rightness is one of the side effects of the New Brutalism's mission for moral and ethical pureness.

Another remarkable work is the Hide Tower development. It was one of the first tower blocks to punctuate the London skyline, although its plain and gridded concrete structure remains relatively unassuming. Like Golden Lane Estates and many other brutalist housing projects, Hide Tower was publicly funded. It was proposed and constructed by the Westminster City Council in 1961, and it comprises 23 floors and 162 flats. In *Modern Buildings in London*, Nairn reported the tower as "sober but not dull." He described the entrance hall as "grave and luminous and very like a church," in accordance with the quiet determination and moral righteousness of the brutalist style.[21] A little over a decade later in 1974, the Heygate Estate was built. One of the largest brutalist projects, Heygate Estate emphasized the importance of green space in good housing by creating a series of courtyards surrounded by tall concrete apartment blocks. The architects behind the New Brutalism hoped to instill good values in residents by providing easy access to the natural world.

Morality, rules of right and wrong, is very much pointing forward in the sense that it actively guides the decisions we make and the way we behave. Morality affects the future by determining how we act today. It is, along with character and physicality, a very important component of a total identity, but unlike character and physicality, morality is constantly in interaction with our conscious self: our perception of the world influences how we choose our morals, and our morals influence how we perceive and interact with the world. If one is able to [agree] that a city is a living organism with intrinsic qualities, similar to a person, then it is not a far leap to assume that a city can likewise comprehend things such as morality. Our notion of right and wrong is simply a framework, or a set

[20] Ian Nairn, *Modern Buildings in London* (London: London Transport, 1964), 2.
[21] Ibid., 15.

of rules, by which we operate. The same can be said for a city, but the consequences of its chosen framework are significantly further reaching. When a city establishes, or takes upon itself, a new set of principles by which it determines what is good and what is bad, it changes what that city will eventually become. Brutalism was in many ways a new moral code, able to highlight virtue that had been previously overlooked.

Of course, when I say that London went with brutalism, I do not mean to imply that brutalism was immediately and universally accepted throughout the city. But where other European countries were building almost exclusively in the International Style, England chose to employ the New Brutalism in addition to the International Style. In 1961, the London County Council and the Ministry of Housing and Local Government co-produced a book called *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*, which provided guidelines and recommendations for the new housing projects at the time. In effect, it also served as a mission statement for London in regards to its interaction with physical space in the 60s and 70s. The book writes, in its chapter "The Home in its Setting:"

> Car ownership and traffic dangers have made the old pattern of housing estates out of date. The street may have been a safe place for children when the baker and milkman came by horse and car and everyone walked to work.[22] (HFTAT 36)

This passage, along with many other parts of the book, [makes clear] that London is in a moment of great change. Whereas older housing estates had provided little for the creation of a community, the new housing projects attempted to create a miniature city within their walls, complete with all that is necessary for a family to grow. The chapter then goes on to recommend that London move towards the creation of housing with simple external appearances, common courtyard spaces, and play areas for children far removed from the road streets. One example of this is the Barbican Estate, opened

[22] Great Britain. Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Homes for Today and Tomorrow* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1961), 36.

in 1969. The raw structure and spilling greenery of the complex, which contains fourteen terrace blocks and three tower blocks, makes this estate one of Britain's finest examples of brutalist architecture. Not only did the estate provide a communal space for its residence, containing gardens, a café, and a pond, but it provided cultural facilities as well, such as a library, an arts venue, a school, and a museum. These types provisions are common characteristics of the brutalist housing projects of that era. This architectural trend in London, exemplified by the recommendations of the LCC, further worked to establish the New Brutalism, and all that it suggests ethically, as London's preferred style.

This is not to say, however, that the brutalist style was without critics. Some of London's most notable brutalist buildings, such as Trellick Tower, now a Grade II* listed building, are often criticized for their unpleasing aesthetic qualities.[23] "The principles of good town-building, an understanding of the nature of town character, an informed appreciation of even the mere looks of a town have perhaps never been developed among citizens," wrote Thomas Sharp in his 1968 book *Town and Townscape*.[24] Since the citizens play an active role in defining the identity of a city, it is impossible for them to recognize and appreciate that identity instantaneously. To use the logic of Machiavelli, just as an artist attempting to paint a mountain must situate himself in the valley, only now, looking back, can we observe the true nature of London in the post-war period.[25] Indeed, the brutalist style wasn't always beautiful, but it also was not trying to be. Being objective means embracing all qualities, good and bad. Both London and the New Brutalism had, in essence, a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, and while many found that to be unpleasant and brash, it is difficult to say that that *wasn't* London.

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[23] Laura Freeman, "Failed Utopia of the Baby Boom Era," Standpoint Magazine, March 2014, http://standpointmag.co.uk/node/5404/full, paragraph 13.
[24] Sharp, *Town and Townscape*, 6.
[25] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina press, 1944), 2.

The concept of identity of place, whether referred to as such or by other terms, is often incorrectly equated with the experience of an individual perceiving a city. In reality, it encompasses a multitude of information centered not on the individual but on the city itself. That is to say, there exists an objective definition for all of that which is London, and that definition exists in an abstract space, incomprehensible to humans. But this implies that there exists as well an entirely separate definition of London; one that is created not by the city's intrinsic characteristics but by peoples' perception of them. I will refer to this as *perceived* London. London is an apprehensible entity, and it is important to note that the qualities perceived in it are not necessarily the same as the ones pertaining to its own nature. In fact, it is often the case that one misreads a city, or that one's perception of a city changes over time even as the city itself does not. The concept of physicality however, is unique in the sense that it is identical in both abstract and perceived spaces. The physical nature of a building is the same to London itself as it is to an observer. The implications of that building may be different in each space, but physicality does not concern itself with meaning beyond that which can be felt by the five senses. In examining closely the physical aspect of a city, we are therefore able to enhance our own perceptions.

As with any city, London can be defined by its many physical boundaries. There are streets and buildings with edges and faces which, when observed, give the observer an *image* of London. The shapes of the cars and the busses and the people who inhabit the city provide finer detail and shading for that image, and as time progresses and every element of London moves and changes, we get a moving image: a living, breathing definition of the city that is London. There are, of course, many other valid definitions with the same referent: London is a populace, London is a government, London is an economy. Others, less tangible: London is a feeling, London is a force, London is a dream, a thought. The true identity of London is vast and inaccessible to us because we are entirely different species: it is a city and we are human. But that does not mean that we are unable to come to

a greater understanding of London. By defining terms such as physicality, morality, and character–all component definitions of London's much larger identity–we are able to draw connections between our perception of London and its true self: London's morals influence its future path, represented physically by its architecture and culturally by its character, both of which inform our perceptions of the city. It is in tracing back this path that we gain a glimpse of a London that is normally obscured.

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