

## ***One Way Street or 'The Degeneration of Things'***<sup>i</sup>

**Jane Rendell**

The streets at Park Hill run the full length of the buildings – over half a mile ... crossing the bridges between the blocks as they are cranked this way and that, ... so that you have, alternately, views over the courts and higher and higher over the city. Front doors into the flats and maisonettes open directly from the streets as they did in the old environment. But now the lane of association has a greater freedom and wider meaning ... The dualism of the slum street – which was comprehensible but unenclosed – has been given a wide and challenging implication.<sup>ii</sup>

Park Hill and Hyde Park are part of the redevelopment of Sheffield, which took place in the late 1950s, on the east side of the Sheaf Valley overlooking the city centre. The redevelopment aimed to replace the cramped and unhealthy terraced housing and industry on the site,<sup>iii</sup> with new housing where each family unit was to have its own kitchen and bathroom. Designed by architects Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith for Sheffield Corporation City Architect's Department, Park Hill (1957–1961) comprised 995 two and three bedroom flats and maisonettes, in block varying in height from four to 14 storeys positioned around courts, included shared facilities such as shops, public houses, nursery schools, laundries and garages.

Perhaps the key design feature is the deck access, or 'streets in the sky', inspired by Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* and various un-built schemes by Peter and Alison Smithson, especially their project for Golden Lane in London. These 10 foot-wide decks, located on every third floor, with front doors opening onto them, were designed for 'sitting out on and chatting, as well as for playing and for door-to-door deliveries',<sup>iv</sup> and aimed to replicate the social contact that occurs on ground level streets. With the exception of the top deck, each one had direct access to ground level at some point on the sloping site.

It is perhaps dangerous to generalise, or become emotional on the subject, but it seems clear that the creation of a 'street in the air' ... allows the patterns of behaviour of people who mainly come from condemned nineteenth-century dwellings to survive.<sup>v</sup>

The *Unité d'Habitation* (1947-1953) located in Marseilles and designed by Le Corbusier is 17 storeys high and houses 1600 people in 23 different flat types. Its intricate section of interlocking two-storey apartments with double height living spaces incorporates a *rue intérieure* every three floors. At the time of its completion the *Unité* also included 26 communal facilities: an internal street of shops, with a laundry, post office, pharmacy, barbers, a hotel and restaurant, a health centre, a kindergarden and nursery, a garden on the roof, a swimming pool for children and a gymnasium.<sup>vi</sup>

The *Unité* develops many aspects of Le Corbusier's own earlier work, built and unbuilt, and is the first realized design to follow through 'Le Modulor' – his unified measure scale based on human proportion, But the *Unité* was also inspired by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignatii Milinis's Narkomfin Communal House (1928-1929) in Moscow, and draws on certain aspects of that scheme: the innovative section with its central axis – *rue intérieure*, the variable range of apartment types, including one with double height living space, and the provision of communal facilities. At the same time, references to Le Corbusier's five-point plan are evident in the design of Narkomfin.

Narkomfin's elevation on round reinforced concrete columns was certainly influenced by him [Le Corbusier]. In turn, Le Corbusier in the late 1940s used Narkomfin's split-level duplex apartments in his famous *Unité d'Habitation*.<sup>vii</sup>

The concept of the social condenser, developed through the theoretical work of the Russian constructivists in the 1920s, had to be, following artist Aleksei Gan, actively 'revolutionary', and, according to architect/theorist Moisei Ginzburg, 'work' materi-

ally.<sup>viii</sup> It was first used in the designs for apartment types 'A-F' for STROIKOM, and then realized in six schemes, including the Narkomfin.

Architect/ethnographer Victor Buchli explains that the accommodation allowed for preexisting bourgeois living patterns (K and 2-F units) and fully communist F units. While the former included kitchens and a family hearth, the latter was primarily a sleeping unit since cooking and eating were to take place in the communal block (comprising a kitchen, dining room, gymnasium and library), the site also included a mechanical laundry, and a communal crèche – never built. Buchli stresses the intention that the building would help ease those following bourgeois living patterns into adopting socialist ones.<sup>ix</sup>

The Narkomfin Communal House was not designed as a fully fledged *Don Kommuna* but as a 'social condenser' of the transitional type.<sup>x</sup>

Although initially successful, over time Park Hill's material fabric decayed and the disadvantages of the estate, such as poor noise insulation and the perception of the decks as easy routes of access for thieves, contributed to its growing unpopularity. Yet unlike Hyde Park, part of which was demolished in 1990, and the remainder refurbished for the World Student Games in 1991, Park Hill was granted Grade II listed building status in 1998. Registered Social Landlord, Parkway Housing (Manchester Methodist Housing Group) and Developer partner (Urban Splash) were selected to refurbish the scheme in 2004.

In 2007, Urban Splash, working with architects Studio Egret West, Hawkins Brown and Grant Associates, gained planning permission for the first phase of the project. At this time the proposals included 257 flats for sale, 56 for rent, 12 for shared ownership, a surgery, a nursery, retail and leisure facilities and 'high quality public realm'.<sup>xi</sup> Less visible in the promotion material was the legacy of the streets in the sky, but in his searing critique of new Labour's regeneration projects, designed to marry the state to the market, writer Owen Hatherley draws attention to

their future:

... in the new scheme the streets in the sky will be gated off where they meet the real streets of the surrounding area, finally settling the question about whether they were ever real streets at all, in the negative.<sup>xii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'One Way Street' [1928], translated by Edmund Jephcott, Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* vol. 1, 1913–26 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) pp. 444–88, p. 454. Howard Caygill discusses how 'The early section of *One Way Street* – 'Imperial Panorama' – explicitly makes the transition from the experience of commodification to that of the city... It presents the 'decay of experience' occasioned first by the commodification of social relationships – in which 'money stands ruinously at the centre of every vital interest' and then in the commodification of the experience of objects, which Benjamin calls 'the degeneration of things'. See Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 130.

<sup>ii</sup> David Lewis, 'Criticism', *Sheffield*, A Special Number edited by Pat Crook, *Architectural Design*, (September 1961), pp. 397-398.

<sup>iii</sup> See John Rennie, Medical Officer of Health, December 1935, Sheffield Archives: CA-MIN/74, p. 221 and the Report of Planning Officer, G. C. Craven, presented in November 1936, referred to in 'Sources for the Study of Park Hill and Hyde Park Flats, <http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/archives-and-local-studies/publications/park-hill-flats> (accessed 11 July 2011).

<sup>iv</sup> 'Housing at Park Hill and Hyde Park, Sheffield', *The Architects' Journal Information Library* (21 July 1965), p. 160.

<sup>v</sup> 'Park Hill Development', *The Architects' Journal* (23 August 1961), p. 272.

<sup>vi</sup> See Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre Complete 1938–1946* (Switzerland: Les Editions d'Architecture Erlenbach-Zurich, 1946), pp. 170–187.

<sup>vii</sup> Franziska Bollerey and Axel Föhl, 'Architecture of the Avant Garde: Icons and Iconoclasts' p. 46. [http://www.maps-moscow.com/userdata/part\\_01.pdf](http://www.maps-moscow.com/userdata/part_01.pdf) (accessed 12 April 2011).

<sup>viii</sup> Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995), p. 118.

<sup>ix</sup> Victor Buchli, 'Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 57(2), (1998): pp. 160–181, p. 162.

<sup>x</sup> Buchli, 'Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow', p. 162.

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<sup>xi</sup> Urban Splash planning application file, Park Hill North Block, 2007. (*SheffieldArchives:CA206/2007/2476*) referred to in 'Sources for the Study of Park Hill and Hyde Park Flats, <http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/archives-and-local-studies/publications/park-hill-flats> (accessed 11 July 2011).

<sup>xii</sup> Owen Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain*, (London: Verso, 2010). p. 99.