

A Configuration Pregnant with Tensions

Jane Rendell

A constellation is a spatio-temporal configuration, it provides both a map and calendar of the individual stars and planets and their place in the overall pattern of the sky. Each star occupies a discrete position in relation to the others; it also has its own unique life span or time. Each star has a different duration, and what we see of a star today is not simply a function of what is physically present right now, but it is also a trace of what has occurred, which even as we look at it now is no longer present.ⁱ

On a visit to a ruined arts and crafts house in London's green belt ten years ago I salvaged a few items – notably one book, *New Architecture of London: A Selection of Buildings since 1930*,ⁱⁱ along with a selection of black and white photographs, some of which are reproduced here. Recently I have become fascinated with tracking down the buildings imaged in the photographs. As well as the architectural qualities of the structures, I have had five text-based clues to work with – a board in front of one block of flats with the name: 'Ernest Knifton Ltd.'; a car parked outside another with the registration plate: 'SLX 956'; a street sign reading 'Westmoreland Terrace'; and letters over the entrances to two other buildings with the words: '1-24 Edmund Street' and 'Witl-'.

The 'reassertion of space in critical social theory', the subtitle of geographer Edward Soja's Postmodern Geographies of 1989, refers to one of the main projects for cultural geographers in the 1970s.ⁱⁱⁱ A number of Marxist geographers in that period took issue with the dialectical processes of historical materialism, where history was taken to be the active entity in shaping social production; and space was considered merely as the site in which social relations took place. Instead, geographers argued for the importance of space in producing social relationships.^{iv,v}

In working between *New Architecture of London* as well as web searches for the various clues, I have managed to track down most of the structures – it turns out that the majority we now regard as modernist icons. These include The Elmington Estate (1957), Picton Street, London SE5, designed by the LCC Architect's Dept., now largely demolished; The Hallfield Estate (1952-1955), Bishops Bridge Road, W2, designed by Tecton, Drake and Lasdun for Paddington Borough Council; The Alton East Estate (1952-1955), Portsmouth Road, SW15,

designed by the LCC Architect's Dept. and The Alton West Estate (1955-1959), Roehampton Lane, SW15, designed by the LCC Architect's Dept.; and Churchill Gardens (1950-1962), Grosvenor Road, Lupus Street, SW1, designed by Powell and Moya for Westminster City Council.

The 'turn' to spatial theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s highlighted the importance of space rather than time in the postmodern period. Academics from all kinds of disciplines turned to geography for a rigorous and theoretically informed analysis of the relationship between spatial and social relations. Interrogating the reciprocity of the relation between the social and the spatial highlighted an interest in 'unfixing' place,^{vi} stressing the importance of understanding the specifics of particular places as parts of larger networks, systems and processes, physically and ideologically.

At the same time I was searching for a new flat of my own in London to live in and buy. So I took the opportunity to view these buildings via *prime.location.com*. The search revealed their 'value' in economic terms, as property. From an estate agent's perspective, these flats are described as ideal investments, not as places where the purchaser might choose to live, but rather as buy-to-let opportunities, real estate to be rented out to students and others. The images of fully occupied domestic settings on the property website provides an interesting counterbalance to the just completed exteriors photographed from the outside, positioning the architecture as a commodity to be purchased by individuals as well as (or instead of?) social entities to be lived in by communities.

While the geographers were unfixing place, those in the art world were specifying 'site', developed an understanding of site beyond an indication of the physical location of a work but instead making strong arguments for site as a performed place and positioning site within an ethnographic perspective that included the research processes of fieldwork.^{vii} Sounding a warning of 'undifferentiated serialization', Miwon Kwon pointed to the dangers associated with taking one site after another without examining the differences between them.^{viii} Kwon pointed to Homi Bhabha's concept of 'relational specificity' as a way of emphasizing site as mobile, located between fixed points.^{ix}

In these decaying photographs, taken sometime in the late 1950s and left out for years to weather the rain on the Weald, the buildings are new, they all look ahead. Returning to

examine them now, is it not only the photographs that have deteriorated over the years, but the buildings too. However, what becomes apparent when investigating their exterior fabric, as well as the views of the interiors presented on *primelocation.com.*, is that they have decayed differently depending on their position in London's economic geography; this is not simply a factor of rain and wind, but of the ways in which different boroughs have had the capacity – and will – to invest in their social housing stock.

*Walter Benjamin notes in his study of Baroque allegory 'an appreciation of the transience of things'.^x An important aspect of the allegorical method, according to Benjamin, is its focus on the image as an 'amorphous fragment' rather than an 'organic totality', where, rather than singularity, an ambiguity or multiplicity of meaning is produced.^{xi} Yet the ruin that features in baroque dramas in terms of decay and disintegration, and as a site for a melancholic reflection on the transience of human and material existence, as a dialectical image in Benjamin's unfinished *Passagen-Werk* or *The Arcades Project*, becomes politically instructive.*

Some of the modern movement's public housing projects have become oases of cool property in the London postcodes associated with the rich, often been well maintained, sometimes privatized and provided with concierge schemes, while those in the poorer boroughs have declined materially, frequently not included in the large scale council repair and maintenance cycles. Those in areas of regeneration have been connected with the aspirations of up and coming neighbourhoods and demolished because the original construction is viewed to be too expensive to overhaul.

*Composed of fragments, quotes collected by Benjamin and words written by him between 1927 and 1939, *The Arcades Project* focused on a particular ruin – the Parisian arcade,^{xii} arguing for its role as dialectical image, and describing it as a 'residue[s] of a dream-world'.^{xiii} If the arcade is a dialectical image – an image of dialectics at a standstill – a moment where the past is recognized in the present as a ruin that was once desired, then for Benjamin, its key quality is its ability to create a moment when the usual patterns of thinking stop and new ones are given the chance to emerge: 'Thinking involves', he writes, 'not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock.'^{xiv}*

But the seemingly pragmatic solution an economic perspective offers is perhaps better understood as a symptom of a particular attitude to the principles of modernism. The brutalist aesthetic of some modern architecture is often believed to be directly connected to social deprivation, to produce it, and this has forced the designers of certain regeneration schemes, the Elmington, for example, to adopt a new architectural language, one which is not so obviously 'utopian' and therefore capable of suggesting better standards of living in a different way. In England at least, successive governments keen to promote an ideology of home-ownership, are driving out the aspirations for public ownership and social community that post-war modernism embodies. If everyone is weighed down by a hefty mortgage, the capacity for dissent is drastically reduced.

Emergent themes in spatial thinking, such as experience and travel, trace and deferral, mobility, practice and performance,^{xv} have come to define what has become known as the 'performative turn': a turn I am describing as the 'reassertion of time' into the spatial. Thinking time in relation to space is not of course new, it is an activity at the heart of philosophical enquiry, yet what we might be considering here is how this particular reacknowledgement of time into site in today's urban theory might lead us to explore new ways of writing the patterns of specific time-space interactions – configurations, cartographies, topographies of flow, flux, duration, ephemerality and event – constellations perhaps.^{xvi}

There is a lot at stake when the social housing of the modernist project is sold off as 'a good opportunity for investment' on *primelocation.com*; it is perhaps not overstating the case to suggest it has created a disaster for the left, not only because the number of homes available to let by the council are reduced for those who need them, but also because those who buy them become part of the propertied class and all that entails. I know this because I am part of the problem.^{xvii}

ⁱ In popular parlance we use the term constellation to refer to 'a group of celestial bodies (usually stars) that appear to form a pattern in the sky or appear visibly related to each other' This is actually something astronomers would call an asterism, and in astronomy the term constellation refers to the stars and other celestial bodies that are present in a particular area of the night sky. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constellation#Definitions> (accessed 9 June 2011).

ⁱⁱ Sam Lambert, (ed.), *New Architecture of London: A Selection of Buildings since 1930*. The British Travel and Holidays Association in collaboration with the Architectural Association (1963).

ⁱⁱⁱ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

^{iv} See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); and Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

^v In so doing they turned to the work of Henri Lefebvre and his understanding of the two-way relation between the spatial and the social: 'Space and the political organization of space', he argues, 'express social relationships but also react back upon them. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 8. This quote from Henri Lefebvre, emphasized by David Harvey, is discussed in Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 81. See footnote 4.

^{vi} Michael Keith and Steve Pile (eds) *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 5.

^{vii} See Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Alex Coles, (ed.) *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000).

^{viii} Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) pp. 1 and 166.

^{ix} James Clifford, 'An Ethnographer in the Field', interview by Alex Coles, in Alex Coles (ed.) *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000) 52–73.

^x Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, [1925] trans John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), p. 223.

^{xi} Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 176–7.

^{xii} See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project (1927–39)*, trans Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

^{xiii} Walter Benjamin, 'Paris: the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' [1935] trans Quintin Hoare, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans Harry Zohn (London, New Left Books, 1997) p. 176.

^{xiv} Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' [1940] trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992) pp. 245–55, p. 254.

^{xv} Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (eds) *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000). See Crang and Thrift's 'Introduction' to *Thinking Space*, 1–30, especially 19–24.

^{xvi} Part 2 of Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), explores the temporality of 'critical spatial practice' using Walter Benjamin's work on montage and allegory to consider the time-based modes of experiencing site-specific artworks and more recently I organized Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London: IB Tauris, 2010) around five configurations, where each one attempts to perform the site of an particular encounter with an artwork through the space of writing itself.

^{xvii} In *Site-Writing* I argue that critic's relation to her object of study is a spatial relation and that this positionality needs to be made explicit through the critical spatial practice of writing itself, producing an architecture of criticism between critic and work, page and reader.