

# ROBIN HOOD GARDENS RE- VISIONS

## Robin Hood Gardens Re-visions

Alan Powers  
Twentieth  
Century  
Society,  
London

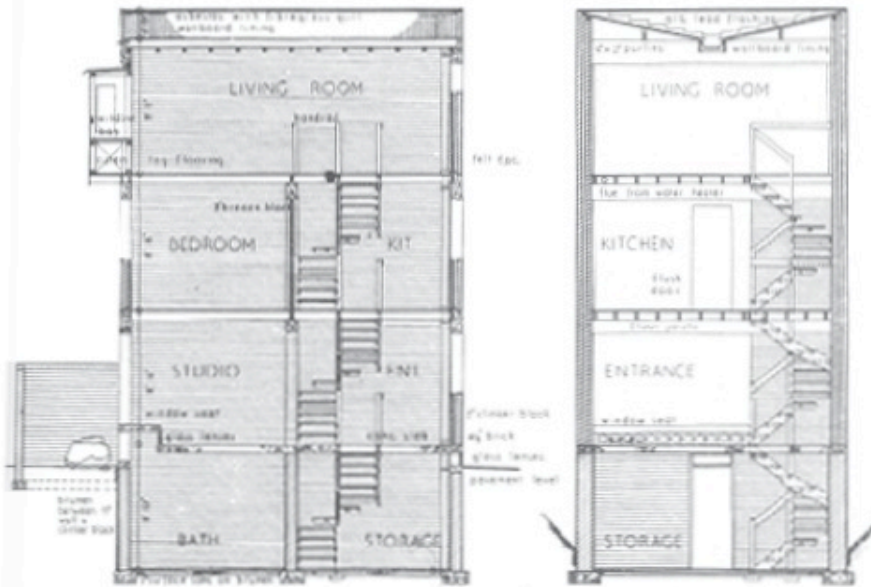
Mythmakers: Alison and Peter Smithson at Hunstanton School, Norfolk, with Ronald Jenkins, c.1953, photo by Nigel Henderson



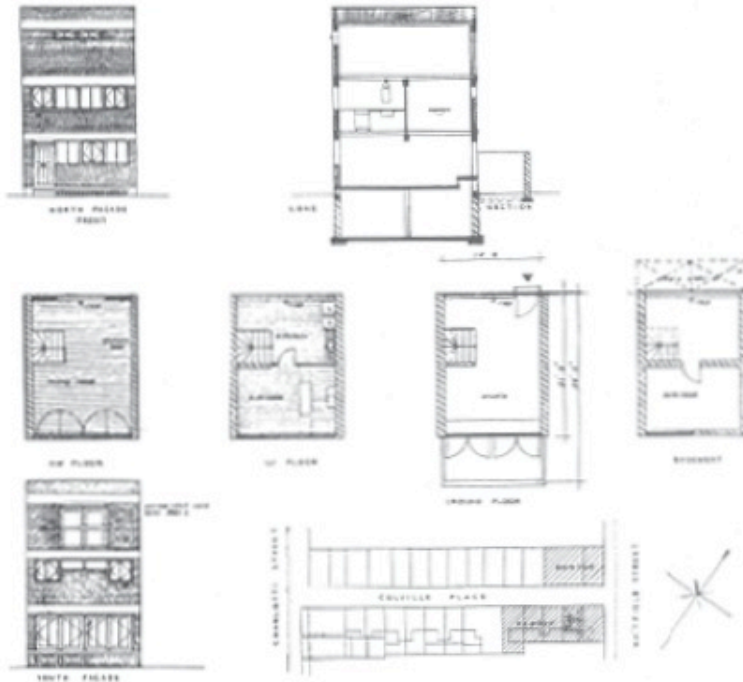
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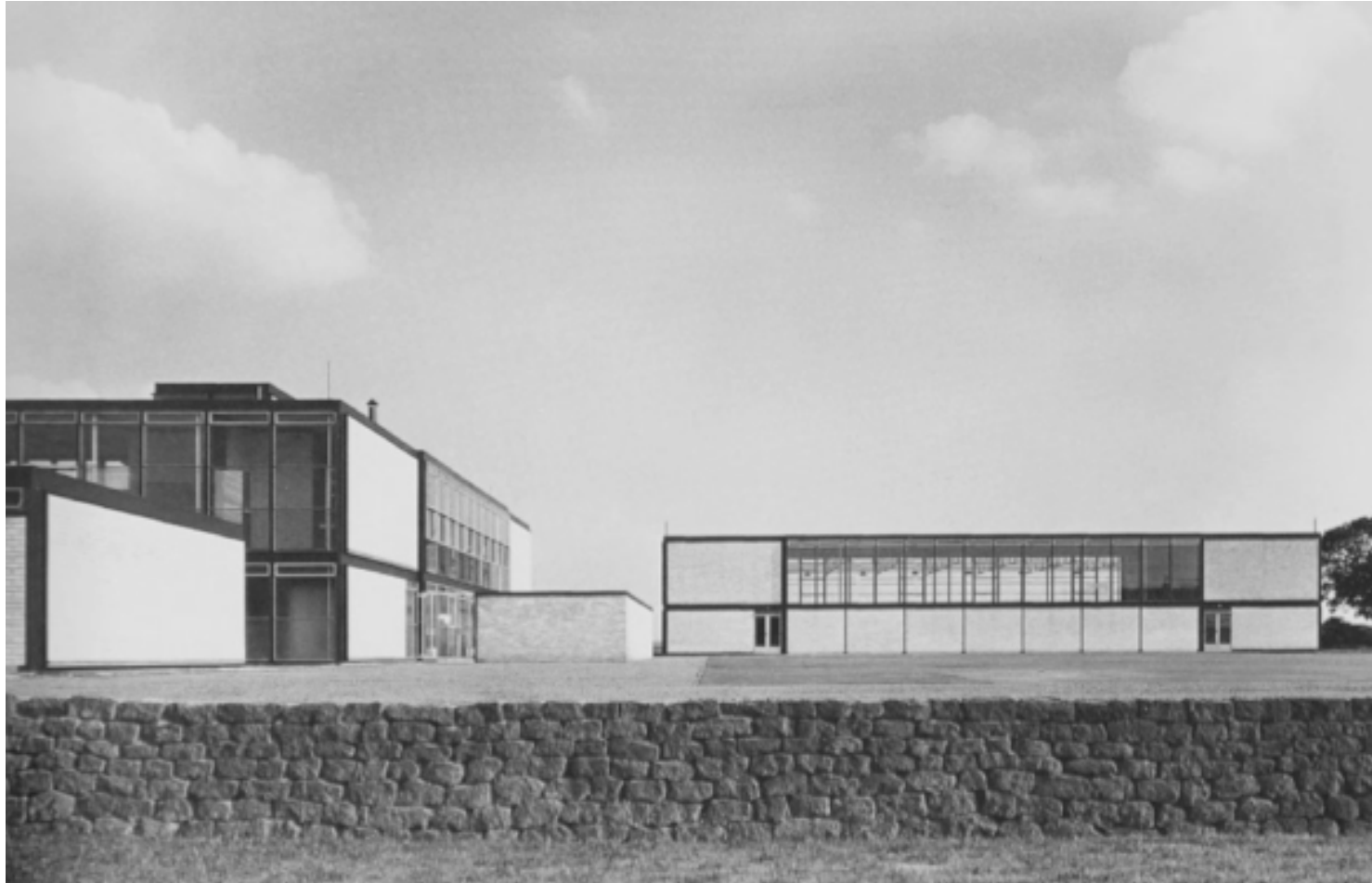
# Alison and Peter Smithson 'Soho House' project, 1953



Above: Sections (scale 16 ft. = 1 in.). Below: plans and elevations (Scale 24 ft. = 1 in.).



# Hunstanton Secondary School, 1949-53



## Hertfordshire Schools: 1940s picturesque





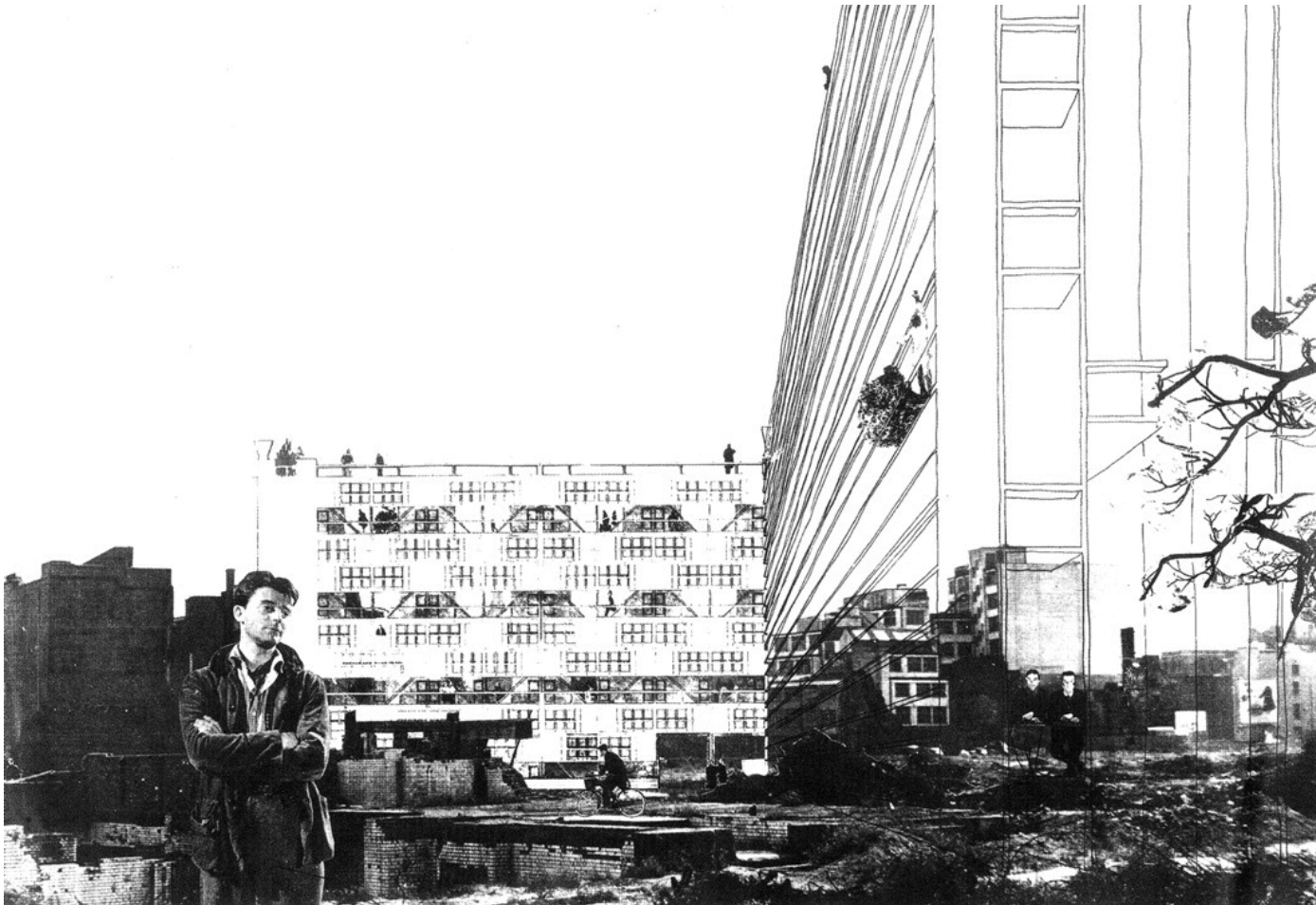
# Festival of Britain, South Bank, 1951



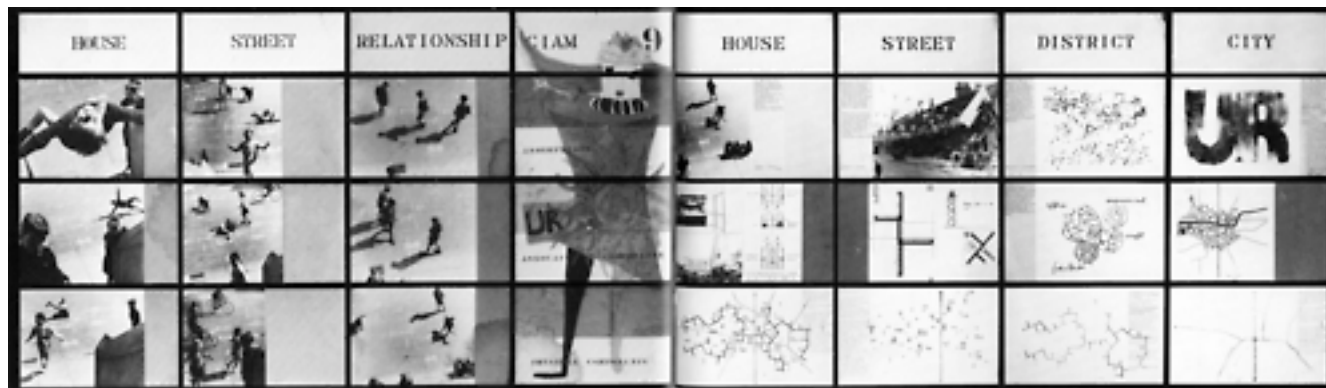
Alison and Peter Smithson, model for competition entry,  
Coventry Cathedral, 1951



Alison and Peter Smithson,  
Project for Golden Lane Housing competition, 1952







CIAM and Team 10  
 'Statement on Habitat'  
 'Scale of Association'

1953 'Urban Re-identification  
 Grid'

Alison and Peter Smithson with  
 William and Gill Howell  
 Photos by Nigel Henderson

# Alison and Peter Smithson with Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson, 1956



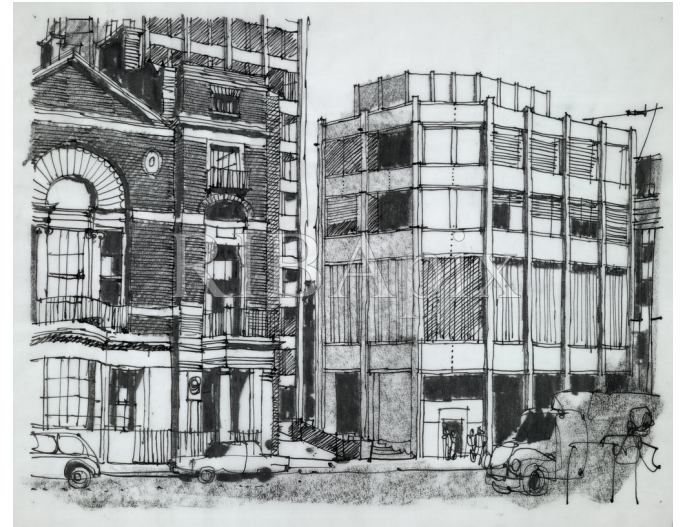
4 Peter Smithson (far left) ,Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison Smithson and Nigel Henderson (far right) taken  
Nigel Henderson, 1956 (Smithsons, 2001, p114)

Henderson, Paolozzi and Smithsons,  
Parallel of Art and Life exhibition,  
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1953





Alison and Peter  
Smithson,  
The Economist Group,  
St James's Street,  
1964



Drawing by Gordon Cullen for  
the *Architectural Review*



## Ernö Goldfinger, Balfron Tower, 1965-67





High level view from the north, with the docks and the river beyond.



At the new city scale making a garden should be like making a range of hills.  
Hills are a great formal idea, ever various, expressive of mood, expectant of weather. Today we might make contour relief by means of the same earth shifting equipment that opencasts coal. Only this scale of modelling is bold enough to tell from above at the new city scale of things. 'Capability' Brown raised eyes from the parterre to rove among fine silhouetted trees,

over undulating fields and inviting screens of woodland. We will be lowering our eyes to look down from our street-decks and homes; another dimension entering our lives.

The land must be reclaimed, even if resistance squads have to plant ivy in people's gutters.

The bulldozer that has been employed to ruin quickly can be employed to

make quickly. It can attack the pre-war jerry-built houses; and ultimately the Housing Manual type estates up and down the country.  
Spiritually dead houses can be bulldozed into contour relief ready for our new homes to look out on.



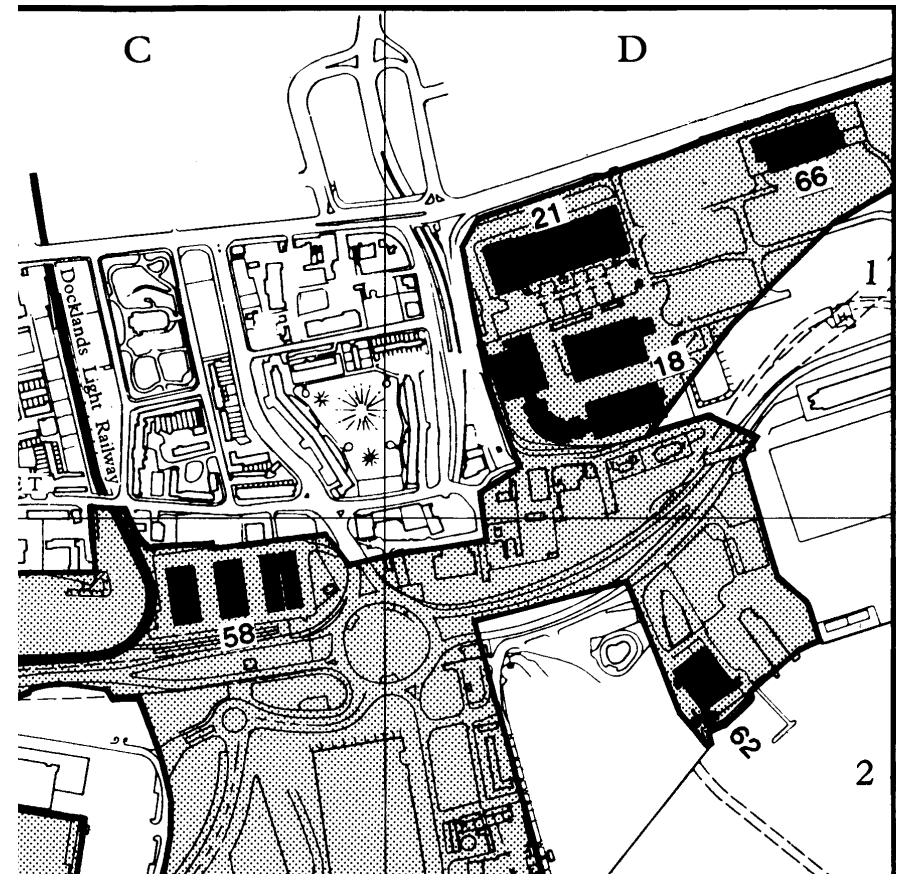
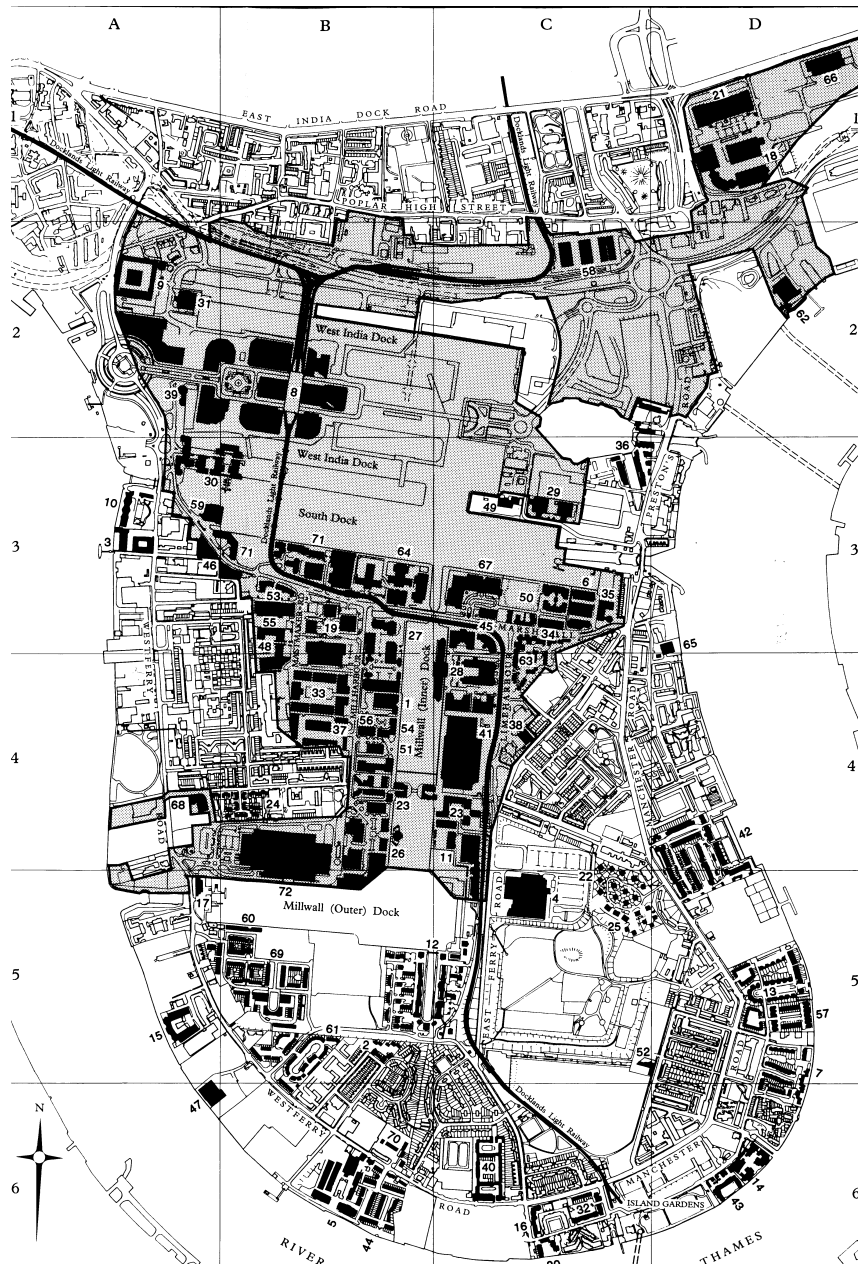
Spread from *Architectural Design*, September 1972



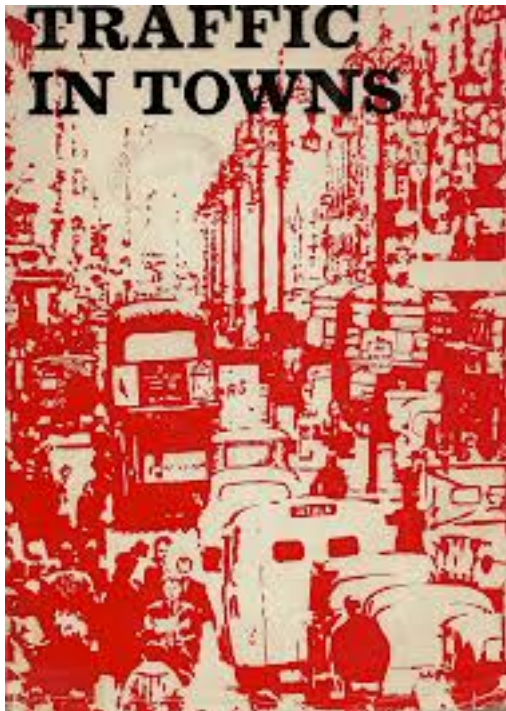


‘one of the most unhealthy rookeries in Poplar’ (1878)

Ordnance Survey map, 1867-70

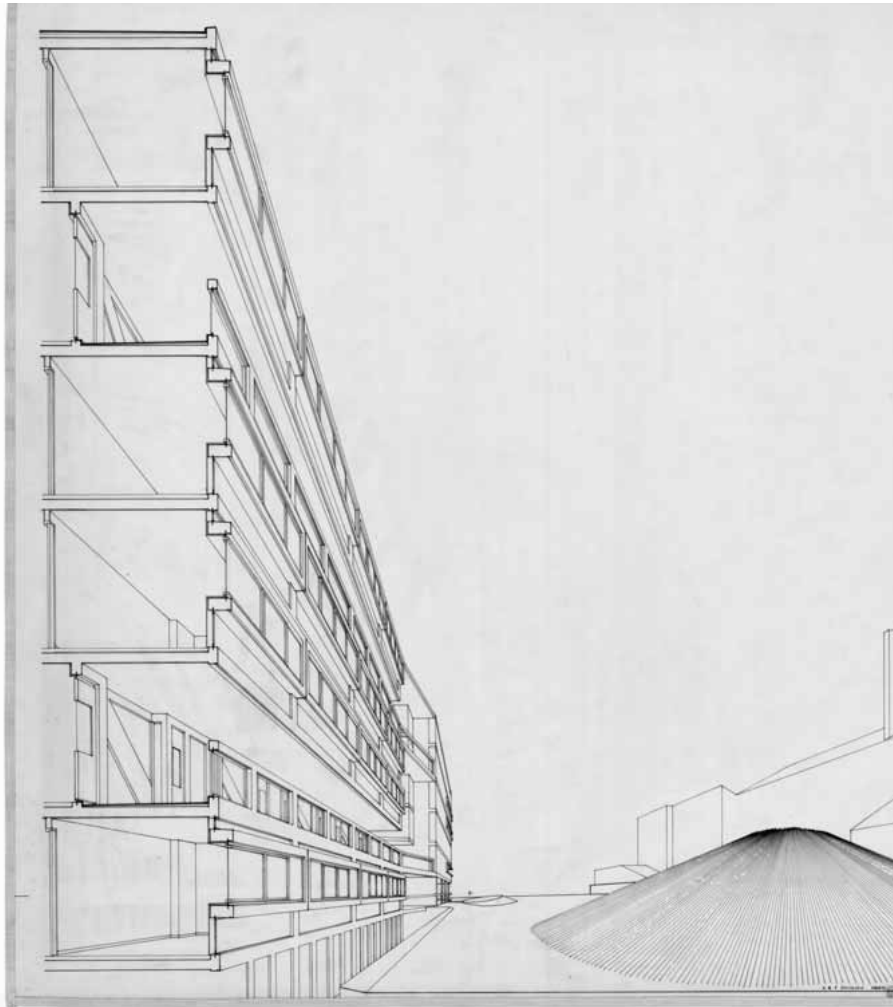


Map from The Survey of  
London, Poplar, 1994



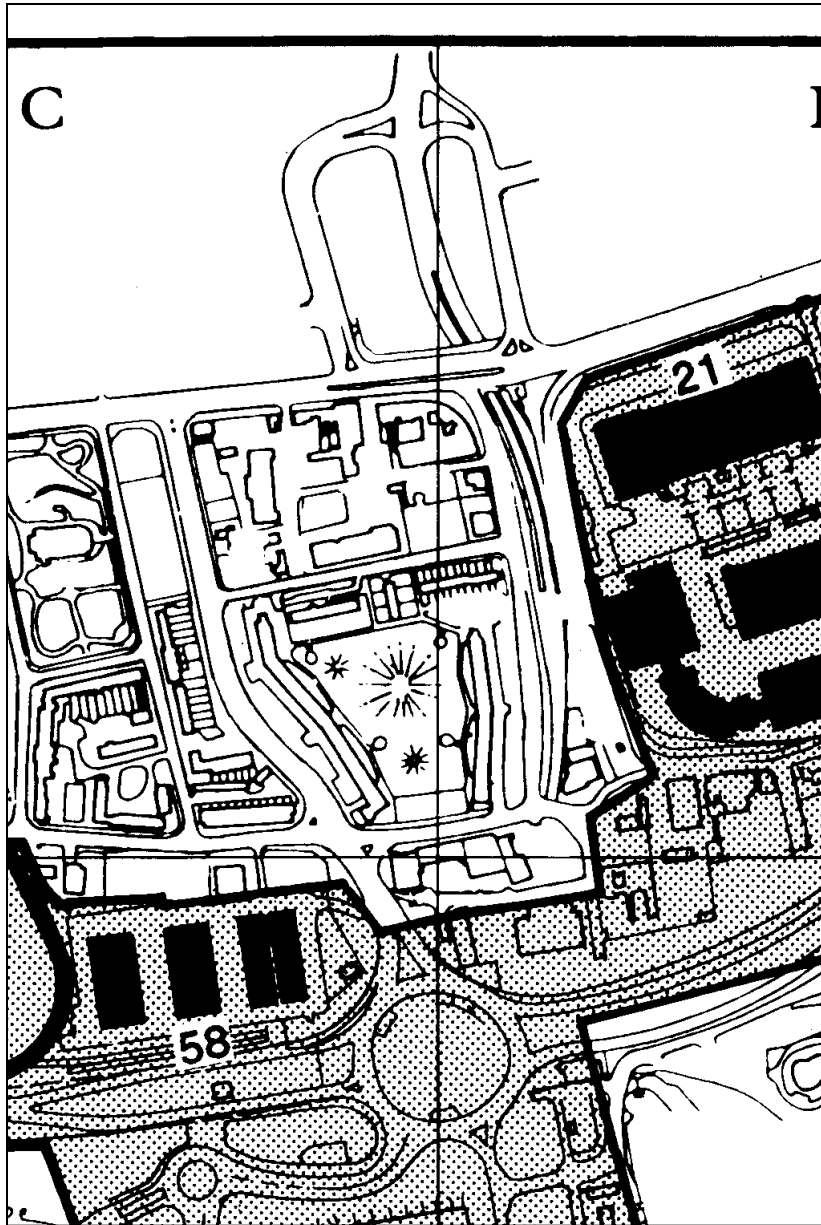
*Traffic in Towns*  
Colin Buchanan, 1964

tive of  
the first  
scheme,  
known as  
Manisty  
Street  
(1962-64),  
which  
became  
Robin Hood  
Gardens.



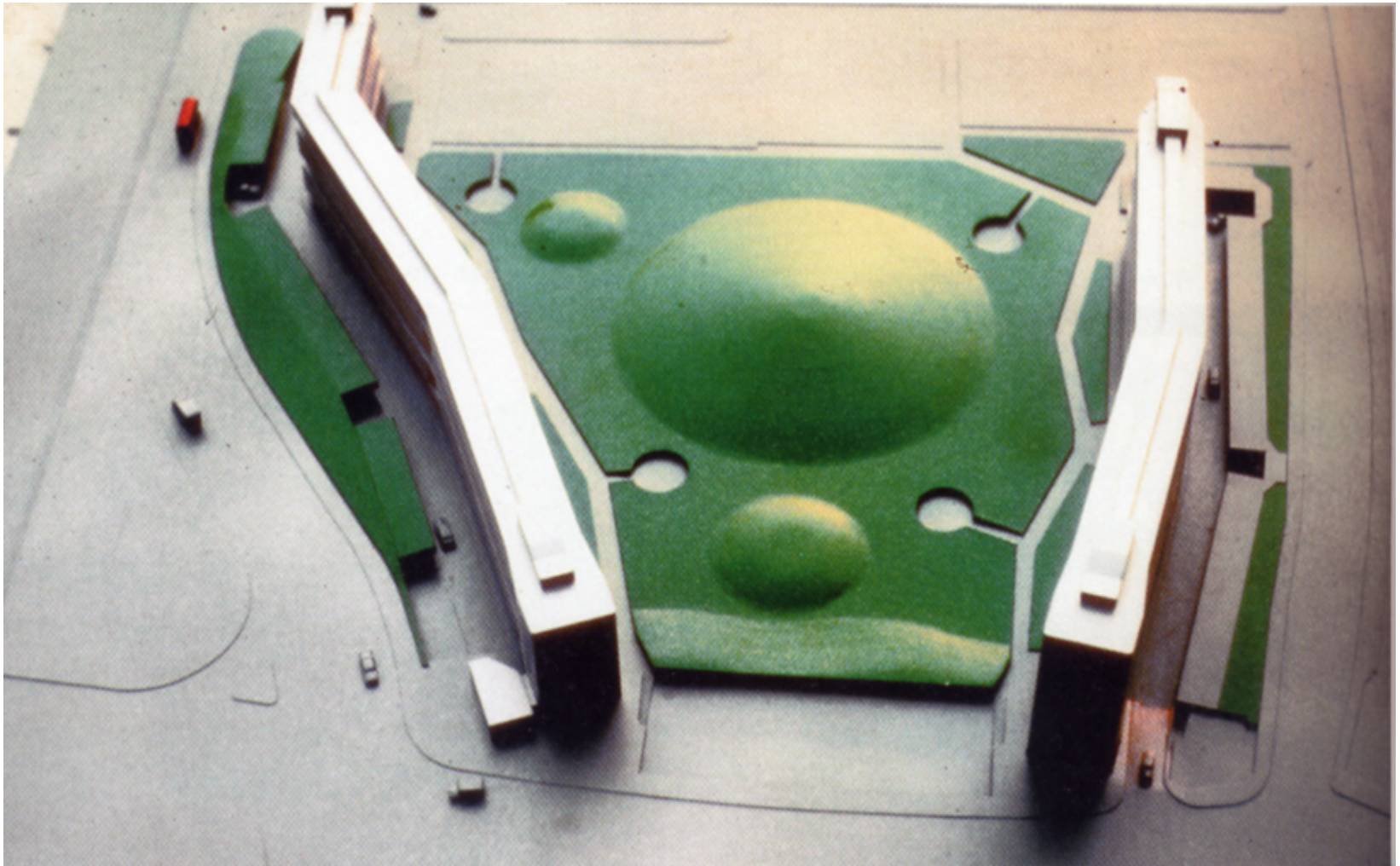
Manisty Street  
scheme, 1962-64,  
Prototype for Robin  
Hood Gardens on  
smaller portion of the  
site.





Barrier blocks  
'calm space'

136 persons per acre  
Creating open space



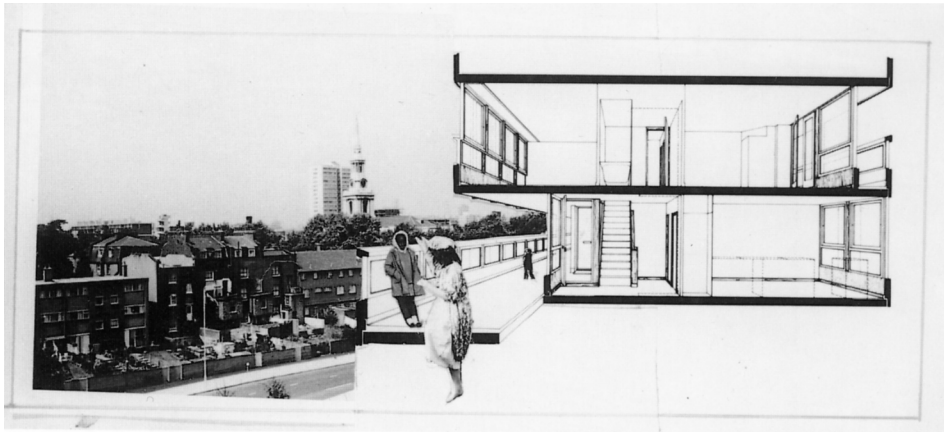
Model of Robin Hood Gardens, made for BBC TV programme, 1970

## Streets in the Sky

Park Hill, Sheffield,  
Lewis Womersley, with Jack Lynn  
and Ivor Smith, 1957-61



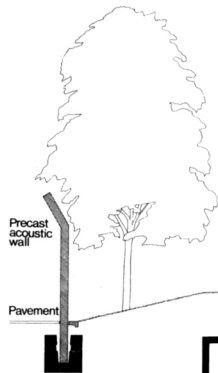
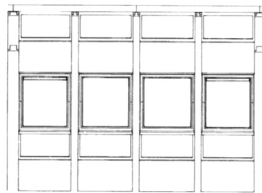
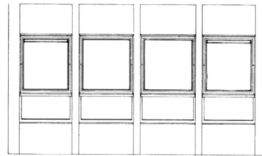
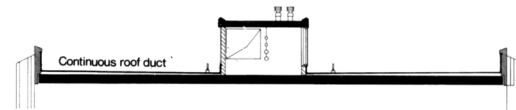
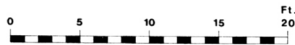




‘In the Robin Hood Gardens model, neither the streets nor the dwellings accommodate activities useful for supervision or socialisation. The wide access galleries are primarily circulation spaces and are only incidentally available in a neighborhood exchange. The outdoor areas adjacent to the dwelling units miss their chance to serve as front porches or stoops because they allow no definition of private territory or any sense of public ownership. The dwelling units are all but disconnected from the “street” (imagine the difference if there were only a kitchen window on it, and a real stoop), and turn away from the link to the rest of the estate.’

Anthony Pangaro, *Architecture Plus*, 1973

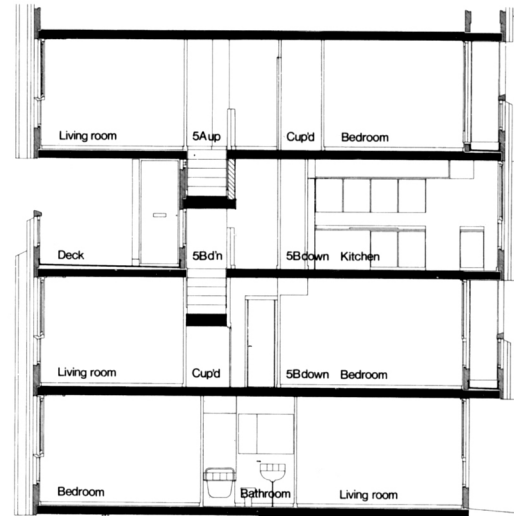


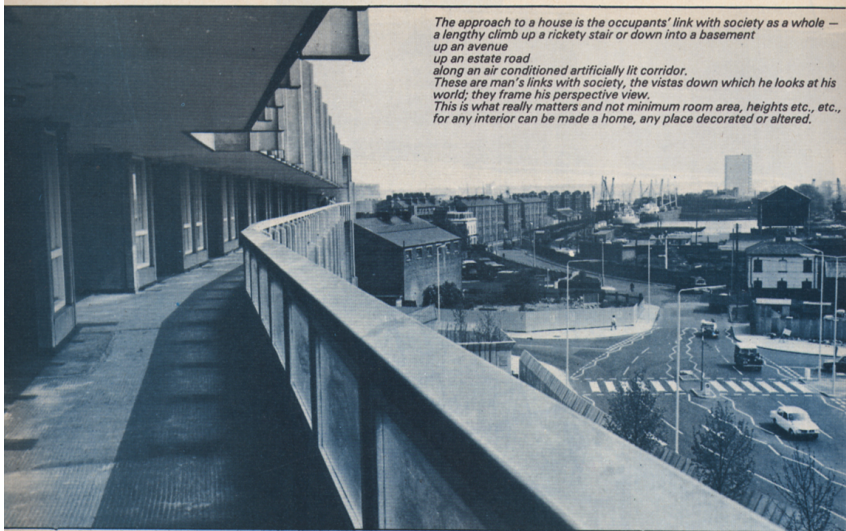


Grass

Garage

Service road





The approach to a house is the occupants' link with society as a whole — a lengthy climb up a rickety stair or down into a basement up an estate road along an air conditioned artificially lit corridor. These are man's links with society, the vistas down which he looks at his world; they frame his perspective view. This is what really matters and not minimum room area, heights etc., etc., for any interior can be made a home, any place decorated or altered.

top deck along Cotton Street looking south



These 'alcoves' off the street-deck are intended as shielded 'pause-places' for entering the house — a stoop rather than a doorstep. These spaces serve themselves naturally for potted plants, flower boxes, etc., — the normal paraphernalia of domestic outside show. They are the equivalent of the 'yard-gardens' of the Golden Lane project, providing the identifying elements of the individual dwelling



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#### Robin Hood Gardens — Householders' manual

Although Robin Hood Gardens is of unusual design and has attracted much attention — it has, for example, been the subject of a television programme — only through the people who live here will it achieve any real life. For it is how the place is used that finally decides the quality of life that a family can live here: simple things like keeping the public ways clean and undamaged and the greens free of litter will help.

You will notice that the design of the dwellings will cut down the noise from the busy area which surrounds the estate. The Greater London Council and its architects have been working on Robin Hood Gardens since 1963; its builders since 1968; it is now your turn to try and make it a place you will be proud to live in.

#### Caretaker

The caretaker is responsible for the general day-to-day supervision of the Estate and is resident at 146 Robin Hood Gardens. When he is off-duty, however, you should only contact him in cases of real emergency. Your co-operation is requested in this connection and when the caretaker is off duty, an assistant or relief caretaker will normally be available.

#### Rent payment

Your rent will be payable every fortnight at the Rent Office at 27 Market Way, E.14, on the Lansbury Market. Please pay on Wednesday, Thursday or Friday of the week the rent is due. The rent office is open from 9.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. and 1.30 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.

#### Area office

Your area housing office is situated at 721 Commercial Road, E.14, and specific enquiries which the caretaker cannot answer should be made there or at the rent office. The telephone number is 987 5521.

#### Play areas for smaller children

In the four round play-pits in the central garden. In the covered play area with toddlers' swings at garden level at the south end of the Tunnel side building. Toddlers' swing at garden level in the Cotton Street side building between flat Nos. 4 and 5. In the fitted play area at the junction of Poplar High Street and Robin Hood Lane.

Please encourage youngsters to use these play areas rather than play on unsuitable parts of the estate. Please also encourage youngsters to look after play areas and play equipment.

#### Clubroom

This is provided for the use of elderly people on the Estate and full details will be given when the Clubroom is available for use.

#### Garages

A total of 143 garages are available for rental, and application should be made to the Area Office at 721 Commercial Road, E.14.

#### Car parking

In order to maintain ready access for service vehicles such as ambulances, fire appliances, etc., car parking must be restricted to those areas of the estate specifically marked out for such parking. Please co-operate with the caretaker in preventing parking elsewhere. These parking spaces are intended primarily for short term parking by visitors. Tenants are normally expected to leave their cars in their own garages.

#### Motor cycle stores

A total of 10 motor cycle stores are available for rental and application should be made to the area office at 721 Commercial Road, E.14.



Interior views of a typical flat on the top deck of the Blackwall Tunnel South building. Living room



Bedroom of above flat



Stair of above flat



< Inside the meeting rooms of the clubroom

From *Architectural Design*, September 1972

# The Conservation Story

1988 First listings of buildings after 1945 – '30 year rule'

1992 English Heritage Post-war Listing Steering Group – thematic studies of Schools, Universities, Houses, Housing, Town Halls, public art, etc.

1997 Robin Hood Gardens eligible for listing, Tony Blair and New Labour win general election – climate of criticism of heritage

2002 Post-War Listing Steering Group ends. Post-war listing now conducted on ad-hoc basis, in response to threats to buildings.

2007 Announcement of Blackwall Reach Regeneration Project. Request for Certificate of Immunity for Robin Hood Gardens.

2007 Twentieth Century Society proposes Robin Hood Gardens for listing.

2008 Press campaign and petition, led by *Building Design* magazine. April 2008: following internal debate, English Heritage advises Department of Culture, Media and Sport not to list. Arguments include:

- failure as housing, from the beginning and today
- low level of magazine coverage as evidence of lack of importance
- loss of original colour scheme
- lack of originality or influence
- Acoustic wall creates sense of fortress isolation
- street decks better represented by Park Hill
- stairs too narrow
- not all works by famous architects have to be listed



2008 Listing refused by Department of Culture, Media and Sport (minister Margaret Hodge).

Twentieth Century Society requests review of decision on the basis that English Heritage did not conform to guidelines.

Twentieth Century Society holds exhibition at RIBA with new photographs by Ioana Marinescu,

2009 Listing refusal confirmed, Certificate of Immunity from Listing granted (until May 2014). Twentieth Century Society publishes book *Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions*.

Continuing interest among press and architectural students

- **Reasons for campaign**

- 1. Maintaining standards of assessment at English Heritage and DCMS, including political neutrality
- 2. Demonstrating the potential for successful conservation of the building at an acceptable cost
- 3. Assertion of the importance of architectural ideas, especially in relation to mass housing of the 1960s

- **Outcomes of the campaign**

- 1. The highest profile to date of any campaign for a modern building in Britain, engaging many architects
- 2. Opportunity to have a public discussion about the current conditions of housing in Britain
- 3. Asserting the role of a voluntary conservation group in leading debate
- 4. Political neutrality affirmed by English Heritage, but pressures remain strong



Blackwall Reach  
Regeneration  
Project  
Early model 2007



## Scheme for Aedas for Swan Housing



## **Gains**

More housing units

Ends deadlock over lack of funds for upgrading Robin Hood Gardens

New housing may be more energy efficient

Existing residents to be rehoused

## **Losses**

Rare work by architects of international significance

Character of open space

Low density

Potential for imaginative transformation of buildings

Embodied energy and CO<sub>2</sub> in existing buildings

# Reflections on the Smithsons

The Robin Hood Gardens controversy revealed deep divisions in the architectural community, going back to the 1950s, about the legitimacy of theory and the quality of discourse.

There appeared to be resentment of the Smithsons' role as well a criticism of their ideas and their buildings.

At the same time, the interest of younger architects and followers of architecture was aroused in support of retaining Robin Hood Gardens.

'New Brutalism' is one of the most difficult stylistic descriptions ever invented, difficult to explain, with strong negative implications.

The shift from hope to despair through the years 1967-72 represented a national mood swing which is still not understood.

How far are we willing to accept determinist views of architecture and behaviour?

Was the 'street in the sky' idea over emphasised? Can we accepted it as good by comparison to some other access methods, but still limited in its potential?



## **Reflections on conservation activism**

In Britain, there is a tradition that voluntary conservation bodies stimulate debate.

Given the outcome of almost certain demolition, it is not clear whether the actions of the Twentieth Century Society were productive or not.

One way or another, the case seems to have stimulated media discussion about housing architecture of a broad but usually not very deep kind.

The legacy of 1960s mass housing continues to divide opinion, with relatively little understanding of the historical causes. For many, its image has become nostalgic and romantic.

The refurbishment of Park Hill has created ambiguity about the potential for listing large housing projects, although the listing of the Byker Estate has





Byker Estate, Newcastle, architect Ralph Erskine, 1969-82





