



Robin Hood Gardens

Nos. 59-104; 105-146 and 147-214, Woolmore Street

1.0 Background history of listing application

- 1.1 In the autumn of 2007, the Twentieth Century Society (C20) was notified of an application for a Certificate of Immunity (COI) for Robin Hood Gardens (RHG) , the twin housing blocks designed by Alison and Peter Smithson, 1968-72. The C20 Casework Committee resolved to make an application for listing at Grade II.
- 1.2 The application was considered by English Heritage (EH), who did not recommend listing. The reasons for this decision were set out in a document of 1 July 2008 from DCMS, which followed the advice of EH.
- 1.3 C20 applied for a review of this decision on grounds of incorrect interpretation of listing criteria. The review was granted. Comments by EH in response to the challenges made in the review were returned, dated 16 December 2008. In this document, EH removed a number of the original reasons given for not listing, acknowledging the strength of the arguments made by C20 in respect of a number of matters of fact, but did not alter their recommendation. DCMS reaffirmed the decision not to list, and the COI was granted in May 2009.
- 1.4 Since the EH document of 16 December 2008 is the latest statement in justification of the decision not to list, it is to this that the present request not to renew the Certificate of Immunity is addressed.

2.0 Summary of EH revised reasons for not listing, 16 December 2009

2.1 Insufficient aesthetic quality

'This is, of course, subjective territory. This is unavoidable. Were we able to assign sufficiently positive value to the aesthetic claims of the buildings, we could offset some of the some of the other factors. Our view is that the rugged aesthetic of RHG is not sufficiently positive a quality for this equation to work.'

Page 2.

2.2 Specific design aesthetic faults

'We would offset ... positive commentary with reference to the less successful aspects of this part of the design: the unrelieved massing of the ends, the over-reliance on repetition (especially when seen from the front of the blocks), the unbroken roof-lines, the meagerness of variety in the extensive surface treatments.' p.2

2.3 The significance of street decks

'The long standing interest taken by the Smithsons in this idea is stated, but as our original advice discussed, it is less successfully realized here than at Sheffield's Park Hill, and its architectural aspirations have to be set against the reality of what was executed.' p.1

2.4 Success or otherwise of the street decks

'Exposed to the elements and traffic, quite narrow, and with no alternative access possible, the long decks are of questionable success as an architectural concept and were not emulated thereafter.'

2.5 Landscape interest

'Under present listing arrangements ... we have to concentrate on the buildings rather than the totality of the buildings and their setting. We can only accord so much importance to the undisputed success of the landscape when it comes to an assessment of the buildings.' p.2

2.6 The importance of the Smithsons

'This was covered in our advice, and we would stand by the assertion that the reputations of architectural thinkers is not always matched by the reality of their buildings (RHG or University of Bath)' p.3

2.7 International reputation and the subject of controversy

'The building's reputation is certainly controversial – this fact alone does not endow it with special interest; it indicates instead that the claims for special interest have yet to coalesce' p.3

2.8 Fulfillment of the original brief

'In some regards, RHG fulfilled its brief very well. It provided the requisite number of domestic units; it provided an open space; it dealt with the problem of traffic noise and pollution. Overall we accept that RHG met some of the requirements set out by the GLC on practical grounds. We would contend that the brief also has a qualitative element as well as a numerical or technical one: was the housing of high quality as a place of human residence?' p.8, item 7.

2.9 Level of press coverage

'The absence of coverage implies that the development was not perceived to be worthy of comment.' pp.8-9

3.0 C20 response to the above points, October 2014

3.1 Insufficient aesthetic quality

'This is, of course, subjective territory. This is unavoidable. Were we able to assign sufficiently positive value to the aesthetic claims of the buildings, we could offset some of the some of the other factors. Our view is that the rugged aesthetic of RHG is not sufficiently positive a quality for this equation to work.' Page 2.

The subjective aspect of judgment should be corrected and guided by attention to the architects' intentions. In the case of this design, there is substantial printed evidence, which, while acknowledged, appears to have been disregarded in making an aesthetic assessment. The presumption is made that RHG has a 'rugged aesthetic'. This is based on faulty and insufficient evidence.

We request that new evidence is considered as follows. While the exterior surfaces are of fair faced concrete, there is no board-marked 'béton brut' employed anywhere. To take advantage of the prefabricated concrete construction system, the architects sought to achieve a combination of very smooth surfaces, where it was likely that the hand or other parts of the body would be in contact with the material, combined with fine aggregate finishes elsewhere, to add contrast.

RHG shows how a sophisticated concept could be constructed from a kit of simple parts and as such it stands out from other system building in public housing, none of which is its equal.

3.2 Specific design aesthetic faults

'We would offset ... positive commentary with reference to the less successful aspects of this part of the design: the unrelieved massing of the ends, the over-reliance on repetition (especially when seen from the front of the blocks), the unbroken roof-lines, the meagerness of variety in the extensive surface treatments.'
p.2

This statement shows unwillingness to engage with the architectural intention of the building on a fundamental level and the introduction of an imaginary alternative. The compositional aesthetic of the design was linked to the opportunities of the construction technique in an innovative manner, developing an irregular pattern of projecting 'fins' that denote aspects of the room divisions within. These serve additional purposes as deflectors of sound on the external elevations, and as elements that alter the pattern of light and shade as light moves across the face of the building at different times of day.

The overall intention of the design, stated by the architects e.g. Peter Smithson 'Simple Thoughts on Repetition', *Architectural Design*, vol.41, August 1971, pp.479-81, was to produce more of a shimmering texture than a pronounced pattern, in order to fulfill the intention of producing a building that was recessive in character but intended to give pleasure to the eye. Comparisons were made with the Rue de Rivoli, Paris, Park Crescent by John Nash and the Crystal Palace.

RHG does not meet the definition of 'rugged' and its use suggests that there has been a fundamental misunderstanding of the aesthetic intention of the project.

3.3 The significance of street decks

'The long standing interest taken by the Smithsons in this idea is stated, but as our original advice discussed, it is less successfully realized here than at Sheffield's Park Hill, and its architectural aspirations have to be set against the reality of what was executed.' p.1

Evidence obtained in an interview between the historian Elaine Harwood and Peter Smithson in November 1998 shows that the Park Hill model was deliberately modified at RHG in the light of user experience. The decks were made narrower in order that parents could more easily see out to check on the activities and whereabouts of children on the decks. For this and other reasons the differences between this and Park Hill should be seen in a positive light. The wider Park Hill decks require columns along the open side, impeding views out and creating darker spaces. The architect Christopher Woodward who was in the Smithson office team at the time states that Peter Smithson was very anxious to eliminate columns. At the same time, the front doors do not have a semi-private entrance space, as at RHG. It is notable that in their remodeling with listed building consent of Park Hill, Urban Splash and Egret West have built out on to the decks to create the same enclosures and hall windows that exist at RHG.

The latter is not a second rate version of the idea, but arguably its most successful use of street decks in British housing.

3.4 Success or otherwise of the street decks

'Exposed to the elements and traffic, quite narrow, and with no alternative access possible, the long decks are of questionable success as an architectural concept and were not emulated thereafter.'

The refinement on the earlier version of street decks as built at Park Hill, is the result of adaptation to the conditions of the site. The evidence of the design is that presence of 'the elements and traffic' is not a design fault but part of the conditions of the brief, contributing to the noise reduction indoors by acting as a noise baffle, while bringing in the experience of the outside world, originally including the sight and sounds of shipping moving on the Thames (as mentioned in the BBC2 film, *The Smithsons on Housing* of 1970), and panoramic views of surrounding buildings, including the spire of All Saints Poplar.

Unlike Park Hill, RHG had to include car parking, and it is a rare example of parking being successfully incorporated into a housing scheme without creating dark spaces for unsocial habits or an eyesore. Cars are very neatly confined to the edge of the scheme, giving an additional purpose to the acoustic boundary walling.

The depth of the overhang is sufficient to give protection from rain more effectively than the narrower decks then frequently in use (e.g. on the Heygate Estate). The 'elements' help to ensure a freshness that could not be obtained with

an internal corridor. The relative lack of overshadowing at RHG, combined with the absence of columns, creates a stronger relationship with the view and a bright, fresh feeling, assisted by the cranking of the blocks to create a changing outlook when in motion. Positioning the decks on the outward faces of the blocks means that rooms on the garden elevations avoid the effects of overshadowing or loss of privacy that would have been caused had the access routes been positioned there. The use of decks every three floors rather than an access corridor on every level was another important result of this concern for light and privacy.

There would have been no point in making the decks wide enough for a milk float, to cite the instance usually noted for Park Hill, when the site conditions did not allow for direct access from sloping ground, and it would have led to a substantial additional cost.

‘The reality of what was executed’ suggests a gap between intention and execution. The new evidence presented here contradicts this view. The RHG street decks are of optimum width – wide enough for two people to pass comfortably and three without difficulty, in contrast to the standard minimum width adopted for balcony access social housing at this time and in previous decades, where it is difficult even for two people to pass. Anecdotal evidence and observation in recent times indicate that the intention that these should be used as play spaces for small children was successfully achieved. In addition, although not part of the original intention, it has been noted that the semi-privacy of the street decks has in recent years been a benefit to strict Muslim women residents who feel able to move about within the block without veils etc.

As for the lack of alternatives, this judgment is unrealistic in architectural terms. Circulation space in any building is costly and gained at the expense of useable space. The GLC budget would not have allowed for the installation of more lifts, and more stairs of greater width would have taken away living spaces. The solution at RHG is economical and elegant, incorporating the agenda of social mixing and sense of place that was part of the explicit programme of the building. This included the intention stated by Peter Smithson in the same interview with Elain Harwood, that there should be more than one way in and out, in order that residents could choose to go right or left when leaving their flats and thus potentially to avoid unwanted encounters with neighbours. There is no evidence that this was not successful.

The judgment on whether the street decks were ‘emulated thereafter’ is more complex, in relation to changes in housing design and policy. The design date of RHG in 1966 is as important as the completion date, and makes it an antecedent of many other schemes. In particular, access galleries with lifts and stairs at each end were used at the Grade II* Byker Wall in Newcastle, which was conceived and executed after RHG, by Ralph Erskine, a fellow member with the Smithsons of the international Team 10 group. The Southgate scheme at Runcorn by James Stirling, 1967-75, also made a significant use of deck access to link dwellings to

the shopping centre. Dawson Heights, 1968-72 (LB Southwark Architects) is a further example, recommended for listing by English Heritage in 2012.

Appended to this document are notes from a 1982 thesis at Sheffield University by Christopher W. Bacon, 'Streets in the Sky: the Rise and Fall of the Modern Architectural Urban Utopia'. This discusses the origins of the prefabrication programme in the Conservative government in the period 1961-4, which is closely linked to the wider adoption of deck access after Park Hill. Bacon shows that deck access rather than tall point blocks was the preferred form of building high-density public housing by the late 1960s. The gazetteer of deck access schemes shows that the idea was widely current at the time, but was dropped from most new schemes after 1971 owing to changing economic conditions.

This evidence indicates that too much emphasis may have been placed on the Smithsons as isolated users of the deck access concept in the period of RHG. It is important, but far from being the only feature of interest and significance at RHG.

3.5 Landscape interest

'Under present listing arrangements ... we have to concentrate on the buildings rather than the totality of the buildings and their setting. We can only accord so much importance to the undisputed success of the landscape when it comes to an assessment of the buildings.'

English Heritage advice on listing post-war housing states 'To be listable, they have to survive reasonably intact, show special spatial imagination in the layout of roads and buildings, and in their hard landscaping and planting.' We believe that RHG amply satisfies these criteria, and that this advice does not put hard landscape (which would describe the mound formed of rubble from the previous housing at RHG) in a subsidiary position.

3.6 The importance of the Smithsons

'This was covered in our advice, and we would stand by the assertion that the reputations of architectural thinkers is not always matched by the reality of their buildings (RHG or University of Bath)'

It is understood that the importance of the Smithsons is acknowledged. This is further proven by continuing publications since 2009 (see Appendix 2) and many visits by overseas architecture schools with their students to RHG. No other British architects of the post-war era have the same international reputation as the Smithsons, save for James Stirling – who built widely abroad.

What is in question here is 'the reality of their buildings'. Some aspects of misunderstanding of the design intention have been dealt with above. The reference to the University of Bath is unsubstantiated and must be based on hearsay, since English Heritage has not undertaken an assessment of any of the projects there by A & P Smithson.

The listing of five other examples of the work of this practice, up to and including the Garden Building, St Hilda's, Oxford, 1968-70, including two examples at Grade II* (a rare distinction for any practice with such a relatively small output), and the addition of Upper Lawn Solar Pavilion in 2011 and Sugden House, Watford, in 2012, presents an overwhelming prima facie case for serious consideration of any of their buildings for listing. Of the Smithsons' surviving buildings, all those erected before 1970 are listed, an accolade shared only by James Stirling and Neave Brown. It may be that the original judgment by EH on RHG was made without full understanding of the evidence in relation to listing criteria, and since the building remains extant, there is now an opportunity to revisit the decision.

3.7 International reputation and the subject of controversy

'The building's reputation is certainly controversial – this fact alone does not endow it with special interest; it indicates instead that the claims for special interest have yet to coalesce'

It is acknowledged that RHG has produced divided opinions. If these are examined, it will be found that the adverse opinions may not be well informed in respect of the architectural significance, or the performance of the building in use, but based on prejudice against social housing as a type, against modern architecture, or against the idea of the architect as intellectual. It is the responsibility of English Heritage to look as objectively as possible at the merits of the case according to its own criteria, and discount unfounded opinion on either side of the controversy.

3.8 Fulfillment of the original brief

'In some regards, RHG fulfilled its brief very well. It provided the requisite number of domestic units; it provided an open space; it dealt with the problem of traffic noise and pollution. Overall we accept that RHG met some of the requirements set out by the GLC on practical grounds. We would contend that the brief also has a qualitative element as well as a numerical or technical one: was the housing of high quality as a place of human residence?' p.8, item 7.

This has been covered in material above, which argues for the strength of the qualitative aspect of the project. No substantive evidence has been brought forward to suggest that it is not a 'high quality place of human residence'. This assumption, on which a great deal is loaded, appears to be based on hearsay or subjective and superficial opinion. As one indicator of resident satisfaction in recent years, there have been very few transfer requests from residents.

3.9 Level of press coverage

'The absence of coverage implies that the development was not perceived to be worthy of comment.'

This issue has been addressed in previous correspondence. There is no standard metric of press coverage in relation to the quality of a building or its suitability for listing. The nature of publishing can be that a magazine acquires exclusive

rights to publication in Britain, as appears to have been the case with *Architectural Design* and RHG, where the significance is indicated by the extent of the coverage. The estate was covered in detail in a documentary by B. S. Johnson for the BBC entitled "*The Smithsons on Housing*" (1970), in which both Smithsons are interviewed.

As corroborative evidence, the two well known listed housing schemes by Ernő Goldfinger in London received less coverage than RHG during the same period.

Rowlett Street (including Balfron Tower) : *Building Design* 28.4.1971; *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, Feb-March 1971

Edenham Street (including Trelick Tower): *Architects' Journal* 10.1.1973; 18.4.1973; *Building Design* 28.5.1971.

4.0 Additional points from English Heritage (Listing) advice report 21 Oct 2014

4.1 It is unclear whether this text has been revised in the light of the review requested by C20 in 2008 and the report of December 2008 by EH which is discussed above. A selection of points contained in the 2014 document are addressed here:

4.2 *'The decks are reached by a surprisingly narrow stairwell at each end of the two blocks, where there are also pairs of lifts; the spaces within these areas is extremely limited and very bare.'*

In the C20 review documents it was pointed out that the stairs were intended as a secondary means of access to the lifts. They are criticized here as if they were intended as the primary access. This correction was acknowledged. The 'bareness' is normal in respect of common parts in social housing. The built in seats on the landings are an unusual if not unique feature in housing of this period, and care was taken to make the floor numbers a decorative feature. The original colour scheme would also have relieved the bareness.

4.3 *'The rhythm and texture of the fins on both elevations is dynamic and sculptural; both effective from close up and from a more distant view. Closer study reveals spalling and concrete decay, however.'*

The building has had no maintenance since 2000 while its future has been debated. This is regrettable given the large amount of public money spent on the blocks in the late 1990s (not always well). The spalling is relatively minor and there is not known to be any other form of decay, either visible or invisible that cannot be readily rectified with modern repair techniques.

4.4 *'the south end elevations, however, are one-dimensional and fairly plain, and the treatment of the concrete is not refined in terms of surface finish, aggregate or colour.'*

Strictly speaking, they are at least two dimensional although not modeled in great depth. These clean-cut south faces were a deliberate aesthetic choice where there was less need to shield the rooms from the impact of traffic. For Christopher Woodward, the assistant who designed them with the Smithsons, they represented the most successful part of the scheme. (Elain Harwood interview with Christopher Woodward, November 2002, and talk to C20 March 2003).

4.5 The outward views from the walk- ways are impressive, although diminishingly so, as high-rise development continues to remove Docklands from sight (a recent planning permission means that the Thames will no longer be visible).

The subsequent modification of the original site condition at such a distance is not relevant in terms of listing evaluation.

4.6 The outside of the estate is much less welcoming, being surrounded by a rather fearsome 10 feet high concrete wall, intended to help deflect traffic noise, but which at street level comprises a solid screen.

This is a highly subjective assessment. Had expert advice on acoustic amelioration not been followed in the provision of the noise baffle wall, the project would have failed to fulfill its brief. Without compromising its effectiveness, the wall was provided with closely spaced gaps for seeing through in a deliberate effort to modify its negative effect (as discussed by Peter Smithson in the film *The Smithsons on Housing*, 1970. It is therefore not a 'solid screen'. The wall also shields the garaging for security purposes.

4.7 Critical evaluation. While acclaimed in some quarters, it was not as published at the time of construction as might be expected, and has not been widely written up subsequently. Most publications latterly have been critical, including Charles Jencks, whose 'The Language of Post- Modernism' of 1977 criticised the scheme for inhumanity and a flawed approach to place-making. Helena Webster, in her detailed account of the Smithsons, 'Modernism without Rhetoric' (1997), describes the estate as 'a paradigm of the British 'Brutalist' aesthetic and praises 'the modulation of the facades of the slab blocks handled with great dexterity and confidence' but concludes that the scheme ultimately 'failed as a place of human habitation'. The Buildings of England East London (2005) says 'though impressively monumental, the scheme is ill-planned to the point of being inhumane'. The estate has received very little written praise, and Peter Smithson himself is alleged to have expressed disappointment with the outcome (i.e. in an interview printed in Webster's 1997 book); 'by their own admission a disappointing realization of so many years thought about housing design' according to Alan Powers. Fellow Team X member Aldo van Eyck described the result as 'grim'. p.5

The evidence above should be considered with care. It is to some extent a chart of general attitudes towards social housing and Modernism, and in all cases the outcome of superficial acquaintance with the buildings and supposition about quality of life there. It is true that owing to housing policy in a place and period hit by severe recession before the late 1990s, combined with the delay in

installing entryphone security and employing a full time concierge, the block did acquire a bad reputation, which was the cause of disappointment to the Smithsons.

Against this can be positioned a more recent reappraisal from a number of architects and critics of international standing, as submitted in the C20 review application in 2008, showing that the negative views of the past (to which a great many Modernist buildings were subject) should not be taken as important evidence in reaching a decision.

4.8 'ASSESSMENT: While designed with an optimism and a vision that must be applauded it has, ultimately, failed as a piece of community architecture. We can respect and admire the vision, and admire the formal qualities it possesses, but in conclusion we cannot recommend it for listing.' p.6

This concluding paragraph appears to place the whole justification for refusal of listing on failure 'as a piece of community architecture'. The evidence for this failure is nowhere stated, nor does it appear that similar tests were imposed in related listing cases of the past. The evidence of observation and conversation with residents in recent years presents a very different and more positive view, despite continuing lack of maintenance. There are vegetable gardens fringing the main green space, and frequently younger children play in the park while older ones use the ball court space at the south end. There are no obvious signs of social malaise, despite the multi-ethnic social mix and apparently relatively low income levels of the inhabitants.

The key listing criteria of 'special architectural and historic interest' are fully met, and the continuing positive international interest in it since the granting of the COI is evidence of this.

5.0 Summary

5.1 We have dealt with the principal reasons stated by English Heritage in documents of 2008, 2009 and 2014 for the decision not to recommend for listing. In the current document, we have questioned the evidence or logic of these reasons, in some cases by requesting a more careful look at the physical evidence of the building, in others by requesting a more realistic understanding of the economic and constructional conditions under which it was produced. In a number of cases we have brought forward new evidence from interviews with the original architects, and from academic research on the subject of deck access housing.

5.2 We believe that none of the reasons given for not listing Robin Hood Gardens is convincing or properly evidenced according to listing criteria, and that the previous decisions not to list were unsound. It is therefore desirable in the interest of maintaining a consistent standard of assessment to reassess the building afresh and incorporate the new evidence.

Appendix

'Streets in the Sky: the Rise and Fall of the Modern Architectural Urban Utopia'
by Christopher W. Bacon, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield Department of Town
and Regional Planning August 1982

p.278 Deck housing was an important part of the prefabrication programme
encouraged by Keith Joseph and Geoffrey Rippon as Ministers of Housing and
Local Government in 1961-4. Both had ties to the building industry, Joseph with
Bovis and Rippon later with Cubitts. 25 building firms were involved in the
1960s (p.285). New building stopped after 1971 with rising inflation.

Gazetteer p.327

Examples of Deck Housing in the UK

Liverpool

Netherley 1964-71

Belle Vale 1970-4

Gleave St 1967-70

Manchester

Hulme 2 1965-8

Hulme 3 1965-70

Hulme 4 1965-9

Hulme 5 1968-71

Moss Side 1968-71

Gibson St 1965-71

Wellington St 1965-71

Turkey Lane 1965-71

Oldham

St Marys 1964-7

Burnley

Trafalgar Park 1967-71

Salford

Brindleheath 1969-81

Runcorn

Castlefields 1968-71

Southgate 1967-75

Macclesfield

Victoria Park 1967-9

N Tyneside
Killingworth 1968-73

Leicester
St Andrews 1968-71

Nottingham
Balloon Woods 1966-8
Kildare Road 1966-9
Hyson Green 1967-70
Caunton Ave 1967-71
Radford 19697-70
Old Basford 1968-72

Westminster
Lisson Green 1965-75
Brunel 1967-74

Kensington and Chelsea
World's End 1963-7

Hammersmith
Cheeseman's Terrace 1970-5

Lambeth
Stockwell Park 1968-72
Flaxman Road 1968-72
Angell Town 1969-72
Loughborough Park – Stanwyck House 1972-83

Southwark
North Peckham 1965-73
Aylesbury 1967-71
Dawson Heights 1968-72
Heygate Estate, completed 1974

Greenwich
Cardwell Est 1965-8
Connaught Gardens 1965-8
Glyndon Est 1965-8

Tower Hamlets
Lefevre Road 1967-70
Tredegar Road 1973-6
Manchester Road 1965-70

Islington
Packington St 1965-8

Camden
Wendling and Bacton 1963-7

Brent
Stonebridge c.1971

Haringey
Broadwater Farm 1965-9
Penbury Road 1965-70
Uplands Road 1965-8

Waltham Forest
Cathall road 1963-75

GLC
Thamesmead 1967-73
Osprey Est 1964-9
Ward Royal 1966-9?

Southampton
Pleasant View 1966-9

Portsmouth
Hyde Park Road 1965-7

Cambridge
Roseford Rad 1964-7

Norwich
Vauxhall St 1967-9

Birmingham
Islington Row 1967-72

Wolverhampton
Heath town 1966-9
Park Village 1968-70

Glasgow
Balgrayhill 1965-8
Darnley 1970-6

Edinburgh
West Pilton A 1965-7
West Pilton B 1965-7
Carnegie Court 1964-6

Leith Fort 1958-63

Dundee

Whitefield 1968-72