urbed
urbanism environment design

Understanding the mistake

A story of two English estates

Date: 3rd August 2006

It must have been so exciting to be an architect or a town planner back in the 1960s. As Martin Richardson says of the London County Council at the time; 'The whole of the housing division seemed like a giant nursery school whose principal objective was the happiness of the architects'[1]. Looking back on the legacy of these fun-loving architects, they can appear reckless. They did after all sacrifice the quality of life of thousands of - mainly poor - people confined to live in the housing estates they designed. They also undermined the structure, appearance and function of many of our towns and cities particularly in the UK. All in pursuit of the ideals that so entertained them. This is what the seminar called the World's Longest Mistake.

These urbanists were not however bad people. They certainly didn't lack talent and could almost certainly claim a stronger ideological base and sense of social responsibility than most of today's urban professionals. It was not even the case that they pursued their ideals in the face of widespread public opposition. In the 1950s and 60s there was a general mood of optimism and modernism shared by politicians and the public alike. The architects and planners of the time were giving the public what it wanted, replacing the cramped unsanitary terraced housing that still dominated many cities with modern, light, spacious apartment blocks surrounded by generous open space and protected from the increasing level of traffic with bridges and underpasses.

When I was very young there was a children's programme on television that reflected this mood. Mary, Mungo and Midge was a cartoon featuring a small girl, a dog and a mouse, living in a balanced, functional family on the top of a tower block where the sun always shined and the lifts always worked (Midge the mouse used to sit on Mungo's nose to press the button and watch the brightly coloured lights as the lift ascended). The landings and walkways were the settings for adventures and play rather than the squalid places full of dog shit and used syringes that many were to become.

It would therefore be a mistake to dismiss previous generations of urban professionals as misguided. They were just like us. What is more when they were asked by their clients and

[1] Richardson Martin – Tower Block: Modern public housing in England, 1994

10 Little Lever Street, Manchester M1 1HR
t. +44 (0)161 200 5500 f. +44 (0)161 237 3994
e. info@urbed.coop w. www.urbed.coop
urbed (urbanism, environment and design) Ltd, is a co-operative company registered in England and Wales No. 5741006

by the future residents of their developments whether they were sure that what they were doing was right, their answer was as convincing as ours is today. A failure to understand the nature of the 'world's longest mistake' will therefore mean that we endlessly repeat it in new and imaginative ways.

Let us start therefore with the story of the Park Hill Estate in Sheffield. My company URBED was recently part of an unsuccessful bid to reconfigure and refurbish the estate which sits on a hill on the edge of Sheffield City Centre. At first sight the dull stained concrete blocks sitting on the skyline above the main railway station present an image of a typical failed 60s estate. Up close it's not much better. The public realm is dominated by concrete and desolate grassed areas and a shopping centre largely boarded-up.

However it was not always thus as a book published in 1967 shows. Called *10 years of Housing in Sheffield*[2] the book was published in English, French and Russian to celebrate the achievements of one of the most radical municipal authorities in Europe. It included the original plans of Park Hill and its sister estate Hyde Park as well as photos of the schemes when they were first occupied. For those of us used to seeing shops on council estates trading behind graffiti-daubed roller shutters, it is striking to see the Park Hill shopping centre with a butcher, baker and haberdashery bedecked with awnings and frequented by smartly dressed shoppers. How much of this was spin is hard to say, but it brings home the fact that the estate was built for a different age when there were such things as butchers and haberdasheries on council estates rather than just betting shops and nail and tanning salons.

Indeed reading the book and then looking with new eyes at the estate you see that it is a fantastic piece of architecture (an indeed is now protected as a Listed Building). First of all it is innovative. It was built in 1959 a good ten years before most estates of its kind and was the first deck-access housing scheme in Europe. Like all exceptional pieces of architecture it can be described in a few sentences: The estate is built on a hill but has a constant roofline so that a four storey section to the south becomes nine storeys as the hill drops away. The advantage of this is that all but one of the walkways can be accessed from ground level and indeed when the estate first opened the milk float drove onto the walkways that truly were streets in the sky. The walkways alternate from the western to the eastern face of each block so that as you walk along them you get alternate views of the internal court and the external view over the city. As the ground drops away the latter becomes more dramatic with each block, creating an exhilarating experience. The design of the apartments is also clever. There is a complex arrangement on three layers one at the level of the walkway, one below and one above. This means that there is only a need for a walkway every three floors giving the elevation a more graceful proportion. There is a mix of 1-4 bed units and the elevations are created by the way that this mix is distributed in the

[2] Ten Years of Housing in Sheffield – Sheffield City Council - 1967

structural grid so that every block is subtly different. Indeed the blocks are not prefabricated – they are designed as pieces of architecture with some fine concrete detailing and coloured mosaics on the elevations (now sadly covered with grime). How could anyone mistake such a fine building for a modernist planning disaster?

The fact is that the excellent design of Park Hill never quite overcame its weaknesses. True it has not been demolished, unlike most estates of this era, and it never declined to the extent that many other estates did due in part to a loyal core of tenants. However its problems are the same as all of the other estates of this era namely:

- **Lack of private realm:** The entire estate is public including all of the open space at ground level as well as the staircases and walkways. The estate was predicated on the benefits of replacing of small private spaces with large public ones. However public space is used in a different way to private space and the reality is that the communal grassed areas are used hardly at all. There are also security issues as anyone is entitled to walk anywhere on the estate – right up to the front doors of the flats – including burglars and muggers.

- **Lack of supervision:** This extensive public realm is not overlooked by the apartments. Indeed the clever arrangement of three levels of apartments off each walkway means that the walkway is lined with doors and lacks any windows. Car parking is communal and car owners can generally not see their car from their apartment leaving it vulnerable to crime. There is also nowhere for children to play outside and remain in view of the apartments.

- **Lack of stewardship:** Because of the extent of the public realm and the lack of supervision residents of the estate never felt any ownership of the public areas. They feel no responsibility to look after the public areas or to intervene when others are in trouble. As a result the public areas feel dangerous and people are fearful when they move around.

- **Lack of activity:** This fear together with the exclusion of cars from the estate means that it lacks activity. Public areas feel deserted, the roads are cul-de-sacs and have no traffic. This reduces still further the potential for natural surveillance and means that local shops have no passing trade. In some neighbourhoods the redevelopment of the 1960s removed a high street with hundreds of shops only to find that the new estate struggled to support a small shopping precinct. This of course further reduces the amount of activity.

These four factors account for the failure of most modernist estates. True, the problems have been compounded in many areas by bad design, lettings policies that fill estates with the poorest people and peripheral locations without access to facilities and transport.

However the fundamental problem is rarely just bad design and even really well designed estates can suffer problems as Park Hill demonstrates. The problem was a lack of understanding of the basic principles upon which all urban areas are built; a permeable network of streets, a clear separation between public and private space and a degree of activity and animation throughout the day and week.

These points are important because if we don't understand why modernist estates didn't work we can't put them right and we run the risk of making the mistakes again. In the US the New Urbanist Movement has reacted against modernism in all of its forms and retreated into a small town American neo-traditionalism of capper board houses and picket fences. Yet urbanism surely does not have to be twee traditionalism. In a chapter for a recently published book on Urban Design Futures[3] I argued that urbanism must not be tied to any one style. If it is it will become a fashion that will quickly pass. Urbanism is more important than this. There is a need for us to be sufficiently confident in its principles to develop different styles of urbanism, traditional, fractured, organic, post modern and yes, even modernist urbanism.

This brings us to our second estate - Hulme in Manchester - a much larger neighbourhood that was made up of six modernist estates totalling some 6,000 homes. In the 1930s Hulme had been a poor but lively district with 130,000 residents and almost 1,000 shops. The first redevelopments took place in the mid 1930s but it was not until the 1960s that the area was comprehensively redeveloped. A number of the new estates were built with prefabricated systems but the largest estate, known as the Crescents and not started until 1971, was similar in many ways to Park Hill. Indeed it was designed by the architects Wilson and Warmersley (Warmersley had been the Sheffield City Architect who commissioned Park Hill). The Crescents were made up of four curved nine-storey blocks modelled on the Georgian Crescents of Bath. To make the point each Crescent was named after a Georgian architect; Charles Barry, William Kent, Robert Adam and John Nash. Like Park Hill there was a band of loyal tenants although they had been created through a very different history.

The estate had originally been designed for families. However after a tragedy in 1976 when a child fell from one of the walkways, the families were moved out. To keep the estate occupied the large flats were let to young, single people and large numbers of students from the nearby university. Over the years the community developed into one of the most lively and unorthodox in the city. Apartments were converted to cafes, rehearsal rooms and studios for artists, musicians, sculptors and poets. For much of the 1980s Hulme was Manchester's Christania or Kreuzberg – a place apart and a magnet for people looking for an alternative way of life. The Factory, (the club that started Manchester's music scene and was to spawn Factory Records and the Hacienda) started in a club in Hulme. It is also no

[3] Rowland, Jon and Moor, Malcolm – Urban Design Futures – Spon, August 2006

coincidence that towards the end of Hulme's heyday in 1988 Manchester had its own 'Summer of Love' when the city was for a time at the centre of the UK's music and fashion scene. Despite all of this Hulme was not embraced by the city authorities, not least because most of the residents failed to pay rent and the quarter had become a centre for crime and drug dealing.

The inevitable happened and after 10 years of conflict, money was allocated to redevelop the estate with demolition starting in 1990. However the people who lived in Hulme (like myself) knew that parts of it worked. What we feared was that the estate would be replaced with suburban housing as indeed the early plans had intended. Fortunately some powerful people shared these fears and what followed was one of the most important eras in UK urbanism.

The story starts with Manchester's two failed bids to stage the Olympic Games. As part of this the city sought to project itself on an international stage and found itself lacking. After years of comparing themselves to English provincial cities, Manchester's leadership found themselves at the Barcelona Olympics and realised that they were not in the same league in anything other than football. They were, no doubt, impressed by the Olympic facilities and the new buildings by world-famous architects. But what really shocked them was the urban vitality of Barcelona. The city felt more like London or New York and yet had a population not much larger than Manchester's. The same could have been said of most provincial European cities and the real surprise was that it had taken Manchester so long to realise this[4]. However the politicians and city leadership came back from the Barcelona Olympics determined to change Manchester just at the time when the Hulme redevelopment was being planned. Hulme therefore provided the perfect test-bed for their new approach.

The story of Hulme's redevelopment is a long one and has been described elsewhere (including our book Building the 21st Century Home[5]). The process was fraught with difficulties, arguments and sackings but eventually a set of rules was agreed upon for the redevelopment of the area. These were set down in *Rebuilding the City: The Hulme Guide to Development*[6] which stipulated simple things such as all streets should end in other streets, all buildings should face onto these streets and take their main point of access from them. It set rules for density and for a mix of uses as well as setting out the scale and proportion

[4] As we describe in our book (see below) the reason that Barcelona seemed so much more lively than Manchester was that, like most European cities, its problems were in the periphery and therefore invisible to visitors whereas Manchester's problems were at its centre and on view to everyone. Years of suburbanisation had meant that the money in Manchester, of which there was plenty, had percolated out to the edge of the conurbation where it was not available to the city council. Dealing with this wider problem is beyond the scope of this article. However with the development of thousands of apartments in its city centre Manchester has, over recent years, made great strides in attracting back some of the city's lost wealth.

[5] Rudlin and Falk - Building the 21st Century Home – Architectural Press 1999

[6] Baker, Charlie and Rudlin, David– Rebuilding The City: The Hulme Guide To Development - Manchester City Council - June 1994

of the streets and the creation of a consistent building line. None of this seemed particularly radical as indeed it wasn't. The principles were culled from existing urban areas (many of them Italian) and were stylistically neutral, unlike many of the American codes the Hulme Guide said nothing about the architecture of the buildings. The Guide was adopted in 1994 but even before then was being used to shape the redevelopment with the active support of the City's leadership. Over the 12 years since then much of Hulme has been rebuilt into a network of streets. Some of the new housing is very good, some of it is very mediocre. The neighbourhood is at once mundane and radical although the radical bits are easy to miss. It was the first neighbourhood in the UK to build simple urban housing facing onto streets with apartments on the corners and private courtyards to the rear. The sort of simple urbanism that has been the backbone of all towns and cities for millennia was considered radical in the UK and Hulme was the first to show that it could be done. Since that time it has become the norm for new development and very slowly British cities are changing but Hulme remains the first.

However when people visit Hulme to see this radicalism they are invariably disappointed. Much of the area is built out with cheap private housing with no architectural quality. The area has been built at too low density for its position in the centre of the city and is deserted for much of the day and fails to sustain mix of uses or more than a handful of shops. It therefore represents just a first step on the road to re-urbanising the UK.

Within Hulme there is however a more interesting development, created by a housing cooperative formed by part of the loyal community that had lived on the Crescents. The scheme they (we[7]) built is called *Homes for Change* and is a mixed-use block of 75 apartments, workspace, studios, a café, shop and theatre. At one point when Homes for Change was under construction, its concrete frame looked identical to the concrete shell of the part-demolished Crescents. There was a reason for this – Homes for Change was built as a lifeboat to rescue a small part of the old Hulme. It was built in concrete with access decks just as the old Hulme had been. However the cooperative had also learnt from the four mistakes of the Modernists described above. The building was designed as a courtyard block with streets on its four sides. The walkways are private spaces around the inside of the courtyard and are tiered so that each walkway is able to look down onto the one below and into the communal space in the centre of the courtyard. Access to the walkways is controlled by an entry-com and because they are private spaces the residents have colonised the wide walkways, some of which are grassed, and created places to sit out, for children to play and even for growing vegetables.

This year Homes for Change, or the Yellow Bricks as it has come to be known, celebrates its 10th anniversary. The cooperative is still going strong and the community, which was virtually childless when it moved in has since produced scores of babies who have grown

[7] I say 'we' because I was a member of the Cooperative

up running in and out of the apartments of the extended community and playing in the communal courtyard. As with all such communities there have been problems, the communal parties no longer take place after some of the residents complained, however unlike much of Hulme the building has remained largely crime-free. I can't help thinking that Homes for Change resembles the image that those who conceived Park Hill and The Crescents had in mind when drawing up the original designs. The fact that Homes for Change has succeeded where they failed is partly because of its scale and partly the unusual community that it houses. However fundamentally it is because Homes for Change respects the timeless principles of urbanism described above.

'The Longest Mistake' was to forget these urban principles. To believe that the fundamentals of city building that have held true since the earliest humans started to come together in towns and cities were somehow outdated and irrelevant to the modern era. We need to learn the lesson that these principles are fundamental, not stylistic afflictions and that they are as relevant to the age of the car and the Internet as they were to the era of the horse and the ox. However in learning this lesson we should not throw out all Modernism and assume as the US new urbanists do that we must return to traditional styles of design. There is still room for innovation and new approaches to design. Indeed if the fundamentals of urbanism are truly understood we are freed to be all the more innovative. We must not repeat the longest mistake but at the same time we should not be so fearful that we stop innovating and experimenting in the design of urban areas.

David Rudlin
August 2006

10 Little Lever Street,
Manchester M1 1HR
t. +44 (0)161 200 5500
f. +44 (0)161 237 3994
e. info@urbed.coop
w. www.urbed.coop
urbed (urbanism, environment and design) Ltd, is a co-operative company registered in England and Wales No. 5741006