Dear Christophe,

This may interest you—a lecture given to the School of Architecture in Sheffield as part of their centenary celebrations.

Best wishes,

IVOR

20/11/08
PARK HILL

1908-2008

The story of this School of Architecture at its centenary forms part of the story of the twentieth century as a whole, a century of dramatic change. Think back to 1908; in one sense it is not so long ago, my parents were still at school, but in another sense it is a remote and distant part of history.

Britain was the centre of a vast Empire and accounted for more than 25% of all the world’s trade. At home industry was booming; this was before the first world war, and Britain was rich, though the riches were shared by only a few. For workers in industry life was hard, and having no work meant living in the workhouse. 1908, however, was the year when a certain Yorkshire man called Mr Asquith instigated a programme of reforms to give some protection to the workers and to children, though it was to be many years before this had real effect, and still some years before women got the vote. Everyday life was different then. There were no cars, (Henry Ford had started making the model T in 1908), and this meant that peoples’ lives were centred on their immediate locality.

Park Hill was designed almost exactly half way through this centenary year. To look back to the 1950’s is to recall a distant world, a world much nearer to 1908 than 2008.

Britain was a different place then.
It was still Great Britain, the centre of a vast empire (the map of the world was still largely coloured pink). But Britain was now poor, it was recovering from an expensive war; food, furniture, and even building materials had only recently ceased to be rationed. There was still hardly any traffic, the M1 was just being built, holidays to Europe were a treat, and not yet for the workers. Long-haul flights were a dream, and then for just a few.

London docks were busy trading with the Empire. Cities in the industrial north were thriving, though working hours were long, and living conditions were grim. Yet there was a climate of optimism. After the rigours of war the Festival of Britain in 1951 was indeed a celebration. It happened that I qualified the day before it opened, and a few of us who knew Hugh Casson, who was in charge of it all, managed to have a midnight private view. In the
evenings that followed we danced under Powell and Moya’s beautiful “Skylon”.

This optimism was infectious. In these post-war years hopes were high, and in almost every area, in health, education, social services and housing, there was real concern to build, if not a brave new world, at least a better Britain. There was a new Education Act and the NHS had just been formed. In terms of the built environment, all the professionals – geographers, economists, sociologists and planners as well as architects – exalted the virtues of living in cities, and subscribed to the ideas of husbanding the land and saving the countryside. Great things were happening; Coventry was being rebuilt, in Hertfordshire a pioneering schools programme was being designed by David Medd and Mary Crowley with Stirrat Johnson-Marshall; in London Robert Matthew and Leslie Martin had gathered together a team of architects including people like Bill Howell and Sandy Wilson to implement important housing schemes. Michael Young had just written his seminal book “Family and Kinship in East London”; new towns such as Harlow and Crawley were being designed, and Letchworth was expanded. That some of the subsequent action may have been misplaced does not detract from the sense of social purpose and the vision of that time.

**Sheffield was a different place then.**

It was a thriving industrial city as well as a city of soot and grime. The valley between Sheffield and Rotherham was filled with the Country’s major steelworks. A pall of smoke lay over the valley all the time. All around the city coal pits were still in production, and in the centre of the city between the Town Hall and the Station small factories, “little maisters”, each contributed its particular process towards a completed piece of cutlery. For the workers hours were long, and conditions at work were dreadful. Everyone seemed to be working in shifts, and as the shifts changed in the middle of the night, the sound of clogs on cobbled streets echoed around the houses. Some of the city Councillors on the Housing Committee regaled us with memories of the depression in the thirties when food was short, and they ran barefoot because they could not afford shoes.

On the Park Hill site people were living at 400 per acre or 1000 to the hectare in two storey back to back houses around a courtyard with a communal standpipe and W.C. The houses were so close together that the sun could hardly penetrate. I cannot emphasise too strongly how bad
conditions were in the 1950’s both at work and at home. That is why I spent some time describing life in 1908. In half a century conditions had improved a little but not much. Yet for all the hardships, and perhaps because of them, there was great neighbourliness; people used to say to us “you can always pop next door if you need a cup of sugar”. Despite the dirt and the closeness, people took a certain pride in their homes by painting their thresholds with “donkey stone”, and they would often bring out a chair and have a chat.

Jack Lynn and I were young then
Jack had qualified at Newcastle and had submitted an entry with Gordon Ryder for the Golden Lane competition. I had been to Cambridge and the A.A. and my thesis had been the redevelopment of Rotherhithe with multi-storey housing along the river.

When I was in my third year at Cambridge I had designed a house for the Professor of philosophy who was Wittgenstein’s successor. I only learnt recently that Wittgenstein himself really wanted to design the house. You know he had designed a house for his sister in Vienna, and was later to say to his students “you may think philosophy is difficult, but just you try architecture”. Anyway, I got the job, the house cost £2000 and still looks good.

After qualifying, Jack and I designed a house for my parents-in-law. We had an idea of setting up in practice, but we came to realise that the climate of the time was to work in local authority. That was the level of our experience when we wrote to Womersley. He had been Borough Architect of Northampton and came with a good reputation for getting things done. When we wrote to him he had been City Architect for just three weeks, and we got a telegram to go and see him as soon as possible. Within two weeks we were working in Sheffield. Such was our confidence (or our arrogance) that at our interview we made a condition: that we should work together.

For the first month or two we designed a scheme for Norfolk Park. This had some of the seeds that were to develop in Park Hill, and shows some of the precedents that continued to have a strong influence. These were John Wood of Bath and Le Corbusier. We had made drawings of the crescents and the streets in Bath, and had noted the consistent way that they were designed either
along the contours or up and down hill across the contours; effectively the best way to build.
In our studies of Le Corbusier we had looked at his scheme for Algiers as well as the Ville Rationite. We had been impressed by building with a constant roof line and with long continuous blocks, though of course neither of these schemes were built. Later when we came to design the fabric of Park Hill we were impressed by the robustness of the Unite d' Habitation at Marseilles which had just been built and seemed more appropriate than the delicacy and thinness of the Festival of Britain. But the message of his book "Towards a New Architecture" influenced us as much as his buildings: "a great epoch has begun, there exists a new spirit..." translated into English in 1926 seemed to us to express the ethos of our time nearly thirty years later.

I should say a word about the influence of Le Corbusier and the other heroic architects of that time, because I think they were gurus in a way that does not obtain today. There are without doubt great architects around today, and we study what they are doing, but our relationship to their work is different from that fifty years ago. I think this is because these guys, Corbusier, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and others had as it were invented a modern architecture quite unlike what had gone before. Of course we now know that the seeds had been germinating before then but that is how it appeared to us at the time.

Government policy then changed towards slum clearance, our scheme for Norfolk Park was abandoned, and we moved to Park Hill.

**The Design of Park Hill**

Both my thesis at the AA and Jack Lynn's entry for the Golden Lane competition as well as the Smithsons' entry had deck access, and Le Corbusier had incorporated "la rue intérieure" in the Unite d' Habitation in Marsailes. The idea of "streets in the air" became fundamental to Park Hill. It aimed to facilitate the sort of neighbourliness that exists in a street on the ground where there is a choice of neighbours, room to stand and chat, and space for children to play. This is unlike the narrow access balcony in a slab block or the landing serving four or six units in a tower block where you might be literally landed with people you did not especially like.

The site is on a plateau above the Station; it slopes from south to north. When we applied the same horizontal roof-line to Park Hill that we had used at Norfolk Park,
we realised that we could relate to the scale of the existing housing in Talbot Street at the southern end, and to a city scale at the northern end. This was the strategic move that gives Park Hill the urban impact it has. The first scheme was orthogonal, and I still like the way it echoed the existing street pattern. As in part of the Norfolk Park plan it borrowed from the Ville Radieuse. We struggled to design a right-angled corner that would avoid overlooking, not involve a fire hazard across the corner, and not give very large corner dwellings (you must remember that Parker Morris standards prescribed both the maximum and minimum size of each room). Interestingly, in the Ville Radieuse Le Corbusier nowhere shows how to do it!

Gradually we made a series of design moves that proved to be especially effective. Firstly, we designed a corner with two 135 degree bends. This gave a special unit on the corner for larger families but still within Parker Morris standards. Secondly, we joined the next leg of the building on a line which bisects the external angle, and this sets up a different grid. Thirdly, as the building moves down the hill, it becomes higher and the spaces between the buildings become bigger. Fourthly, the decks run to ground in the direction of Norfolk Park in different places. Lastly, to give the dwellings the best orientation, the deck changes from one side of the building to the other. These moves together served to give different parts of the scheme a subtly special identity; the experience of living in a four storey building looking onto a small space is different from living higher up looking onto buildings which are at a different angle; as the building meanders down the hill, and the living room has changed to the sunny side, the view has changed, sometimes into an interior space, sometimes over the city; you know where you are, because the relationship to your surroundings is different. It is akin to living in a different place in relation to the centre of the city; if you live in Highgate, for example, your view of London in your minds eye is very different from what it would be if you lived in Blackheath. I don’t pretend that we spotted all these benefits in advance; sometimes you make a design move or a series of moves, and hey-presto, that’s good; sometimes you are cleverer than you think.

The dwellings are based on a basic unit three stories high and three bays wide with minimum circulation space; essentially there are two flats below the deck and two maisonettes on deck level and above, the central bay is occupied by one or other of the dwellings on either side. All living rooms have a balcony large enough to sit on.
There was a fitted kitchen and a bathroom with constant hot water, what bliss compared with before! The deck sloped inwards towards the front doors, and this necessitated a threshold which the tenants personalised by painting it white as they had done on the ground, or putting a little lino mat on it. The boldness of the structural grid was intended to allow people to express themselves on their balcony as they wished.

Looking back I wonder how two inexperienced young guys had the audacity let alone the courage to embark on a project of this size. This is the moment to say something about the team. First of all the City Architect; Womersley was a facilitator, he did not interfere with the design at all, he supported us, and his role was to involve the Housing Committee and the other Chief Officers. He took the Housing Committee into his confidence, and every Friday he brought the Chairman into the studio to understand what we were doing, and we got his comments; this was participation. Womersley translated our architect-speak into Yorkshire-speak! In fact in this way Jack and I got to know our clients well, the Alderman and City Councillors with their long experience of living in Sheffield, and we all shared the same enthusiasm and optimism. Whether by accident or design, Womersley came to realise that the scheme would have an easier ride in Council if two Chief Officers and their respective Chairmen were intimately involved with it, and he involved the City Treasurer. Later on, when Jack and I persuaded Womersley that we should visit the Unite, he and the Chair of the Finance Committee, Isodore Lewis, came with us. It is interesting to note that in other local authorities where innovative work was going on two Chief Officers were involved, in Hertfordshire for example it was both the Architect and the Education Officer who facilitated the building of their great schools programme.

We had the support of a highly skilled and experienced technical team of outside consultants, especially Ronald Jenkins of Ove Arup, who had taught me at the AA. For Jack and me this was very exciting because at the same time RHJ as he was known was designing the roof of the Sydney Opera House, and we watched that develop. We had Cyril Sweet’s team as Quantity Surveyors, and Alan Pullinger, the Chief Executive of G.N.Haden who personally solved the knotty problems of the ducts. In our own team we had Ted Nicklin who went on to work with Gordon Ryder, and George Richmond who was passionate about services, and usually a couple of
assistants. Everything was done by hand; there were no computers and no e-mails, and I remember laboriously checking every detail on our own drawings and those of the structural and services consultants.

The structure consists of a central in-situ concrete H-shaped wall in the centre with in-situ columns on the perimeter and at each end of a vertical duct. I remember Ove Arup enthusiastically proposing to the contractor that they should build all the central H-sections first using sliding shuttering to support a railway running along the top to dispense with tower cranes, but this was too much for the PWD. There was a structural problem almost before we started: our boreholes revealed a colliery below the site, in fact one bore revealed four feet of timber about two hundred feet below the ground; we had drilled right through a pit prop! We could not find any plan of the mine that related the galleries to the ground above, so we had to inject the whole of the mine with weak concrete made of fly ash. The structure is clad with brickwork and timber windows glazed to the floor to provide a view downwards. Each three-storey band served by its deck has its own identifying colour, and these get lighter towards the top. The decks are named after the former streets on the ground.

The whole scheme is heated from a district heating plant and rubbish was disposed of by the Garchey system. (This fell into disuse later on with the advent of disposable nappies which clogged up the pipes). The vertical ducts which were designed to be climbed up in an emergency are connected to a horizontal duct below ground; this was an 1800mm high walkway for maintenance with all the huge pipes including the 250mm Garchey pipe attached to a side wall. When the deck changes sides the pipes have to change sides also whilst maintaining access along the duct which posed an interesting three dimensional problem.

We modelled the sloping site into terraces which necessitated dramatic retaining walls; the footpaths were lit equally dramatically at night. Play spaces were located in strategic places close to where the decks came to ground.

Park Hill was built by the Public works Department, and this posed some problems. When the client, the architect, and the contractor are all part of the same organisation, the architect’s authority to insist on quality is diminished,
and this accounts for some of the subsequent spalling of the concrete because of inadequate cover to the steel.

The first tenant to move in was Joan Demers, a skilled and sympathetic housing manager. As other tenants arrived, many who had lived on the site before, she sorted out their problems and made them feel at home. There was great conviviality, the decks worked as intended, children played there, folks talked to one another and gave a helping hand, and the milkman brought his trolley along to deliver the milk. But over the years something went wrong, and it would be a useful study to investigate exactly what happened. Clearly the management changed, the building fabric was allowed to deteriorate, it was used as a place to dump difficult tenants, and over the years society had changed with a growing drug culture and increased violence.

*What would I have done differently?* I still find the scale of the building impressive in relation both to the little houses to the south and to the city centre to the north. I think the urban intervention is right. The decks worked well initially with the enthusiasm of moving into such a different place, but in hindsight I realise they have one major shortcoming; streets in the air, as on the ground should have windows onto them to enrich both the dwelling and the street; from the house one could see passers-by, keep an eye on the kids and watch out for any vandalism. We didn’t know then about the deck housing built in Spangen in Holland over forty years before, and I think that Ralph Erskine’s scheme at Byker much later is a positive development of the idea. Park Hill is based on strong uncompromising ideas, and this undoubtedly helped to make it happen. We developed a system, and the scale of repetition produced economies. Looking back now I would seek to exploit variations of the system at the ends, at junctions, at the ground and at the top. But of course at that time Christian Norberg-Schultz had not developed Heidegger’s ideas about the significance of “living on the ground and under the sky”. At that time Nan Fairbrother had not written that important book “New Lives, New Landscapes”, and I realise now we should have planted hundreds of trees and thinned them out later. London squares and the Royal Circus in Bath would be naked without their huge plane trees, and Park Hill needs them too.
Over this half century I have had experience of wonderful cities, villages, buildings and landscapes, and I have come to value precedent more and more and to seek to interpret it in innovative and imaginative ways.

**But what now?**

The rate of change in the decades since Park Hill has been exponential. Life in 2008 is different, technology has generated yet another different world. Cars and planes, mobile phones and the internet have changed our relationship with one another, the relationship between home and work as well as between work and leisure, and all these impact on the city. The increase in wealth has exaggerated the gap between the rich and the poor. We have moved into a drug culture and a more violent society. Architecture is concerned with how people relate together, and in housing this is about appropriate neighbourliness.

I still argue the case for living in the centre of the city, not just to save land, but to maintain the life of the city at all times. This means building fairly high at fairly high densities—factors that contribute to the quality of Paris, or Edinburgh, or even Bloomsbury. I also argue the case for diversity, for accommodation to be available for those who choose to live in the centre, those who choose to live on the edges, and those who choose the country.

There is still an urgent need for housing; there is a need to build within cities; there is a mood for building high again; there is therefore a need to continue to examine new and better ways of living at high level. These are real and difficult problems that a School can usefully address. I find myself reflecting on cities and settlements built on steep hillsides, with streets leading to a surprise view, or a stepped alleyway leading to some unexpected little houses, (I am thinking of villages in the Ticino and streets and stairs near the Royal Mile in Edinburgh) and I wonder what would happen if you tip the steep hill until it is vertical.

Let me conclude with a couple of anecdotes.

Firstly, around the millennium, just after Park hill had been listed, the Head of the A.A. Mohsen Mostafavi put on two all day seminars, one on Park Hill and one on the other work of the fifties. I asked him why he did this, and he said he wanted to have a debate between the different attitudes to architecture then and now. As he described it, in the fifties our work was all about issues of social concern, housing, health or education, whereas students at
In 2000, the A.A. were concerned with ego-trips and icons.
Secondly, let me take you back to around 1908, to an essay entitled “the Urn and the Chamber Pot” by the philosopher and satirist Karl Kraus; he explained that the world is divided into two, those who insist on using urns as chamber pots, and those who use chamber pots as urns. These two anecdotes are about the everyday and the special. Everyday life is enriched by the special occasion, sometimes by special dress or by a special feast. The city similarly is made up of the everyday and the special; where we live and work is enriched by a variety of special places, the piazza, the corner shop, the concert hall, and the church or temple, varying in their specialness and changing over time with different cultures and values. This is what gives meaning not only to the separate buildings but also to the city itself and helps to establish the appropriateness of an icon.

When we designed Park Hill, Steen Eiler Rasmussen had just written his important book “London, a Unique City”, Lewis Womersley used to say “Sheffield is a city of seven hills” and he added proudly “like Rome”! I think it is time for someone to write the sequel to Rasmussen’s book “Sheffield, a Special City”, and I venture to suggest that the design studio might focus on ways of enhancing that specialness.

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A lecture given on 15/04/08 as part of the Centenary celebrations of the School of Architecture in the University of Sheffield.