

# Conservation and Loss in British Postwar Housing: Insights from Sheffield and London

Rita Gagliardi | [rita.gagliardi@unina.it](mailto:rita.gagliardi@unina.it)

Dipartimento di Architettura, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

## Abstract

Robin Hood Gardens (1972, London) and Park Hill (1957-61, Sheffield) are visionary examples of post-war British Brutalist social housing inspired by Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation. Park Hill, designed by Lynn and Smith, gained Grade II\* listed status in 1998 and is undergoing restoration. Conversely, Robin Hood Gardens, by Alison and Peter Smithson, was demolished between 2017 and 2025 despite international preservation campaigns. This essay compares their divergent trajectories, highlighting how public perception, heritage policies, and socio-political contexts shaped their fate. Robin Hood Gardens' loss and Park Hill's revival reveal how heritage conservation today is not only technical but a political act that defines the cultural legitimacy of modernist architecture.

## Keywords

Council Housing, Park Hill, Robin Hood Gardens, Brutalism.

## Introduction

Park Hill in Sheffield and Robin Hood Gardens in London are two of the most ambitious examples of British council housing, conceived in the post-war period with a strong ethical commitment and a politically utopian vision that sought to give architecture civic and social purpose. Both estates employ the Brutalist vocabulary to foster collective living and a sense of community among less privileged groups. Despite their comparable architectural quality and experimental design approaches, each rooted in social ideals, the two estates followed very different paths. These divergent outcomes reflect differences in political priorities, heritage conservation policies, public perception, and the narratives that have shaped their reputations. Revisiting these cases highlights the crucial role of socio-cultural processes in the preservation of modern architecture, particularly that of the latter half of the twentieth century.

## Park Hill in Sheffield: An Epitome of Post-war Council Housing and Modernist Preservation

Constructed between 1955 and 1961 by Jack Lynn (1926–2013) and Ivor Smith (1926–2018) for Sheffield City Council, Park Hill was part of a Labour-led urban renewal programme to replace the city's dilapidated back-to-back housing on the hillside<sup>1</sup>. The estate comprises 995 dwellings arranged in four elongated blocks, which enclose courtyards originally intended as communal spaces. Following the site's topography, the blocks maintain a consistent visual height. While echoing Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, Park Hill rejected universal replication, establishing a distinctive relationship with the surrounding urban landscape and moorland through its

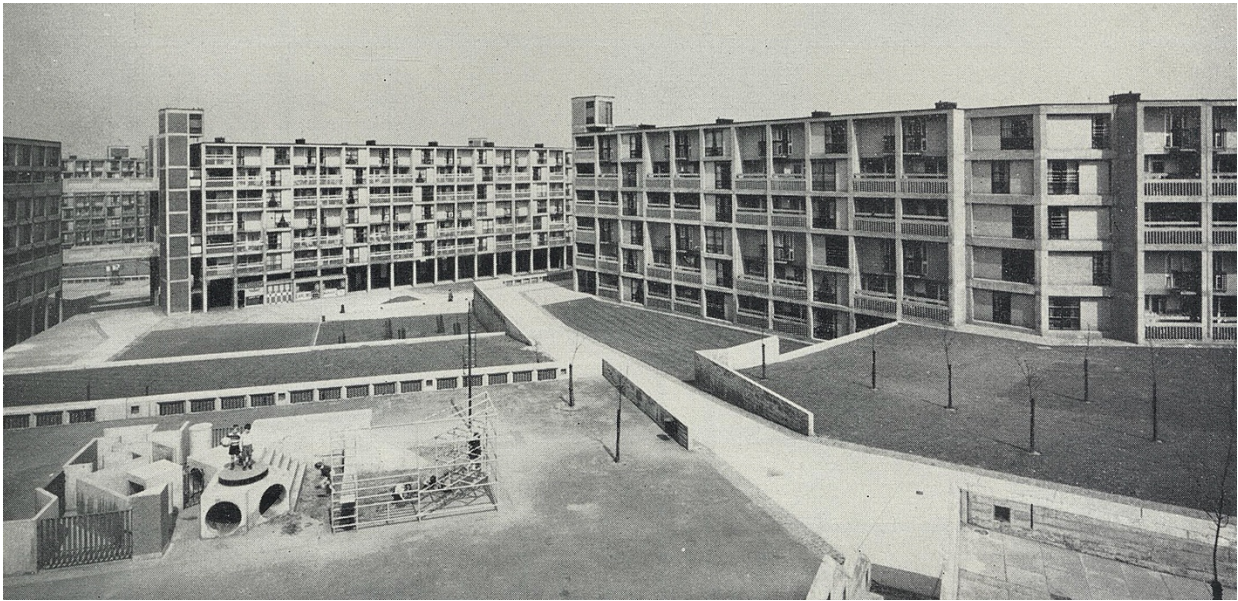


Fig. 1 Sheffield, Park Hill in ANTHONY E. J. MORRIS, *Park Hill 1966: A Reappraisal*, «Official Architecture and Planning», vol. 29, n. 2, February 1966, p. 224.

façades and sweeping views. The duplex units optimise space, light, and ventilation, balancing functionality with urban liveability. Materials – a concrete frame combined with prefabricated brick panels in ochre, red, and yellow – harmonise with Sheffield’s local palette. A key feature is the system of external access decks at every third floor, translating the street network of the former working-class neighbourhood<sup>2</sup>.

Upon completion, Park Hill received widespread acclaim. In 1961, *Architectural Design* hailed it as «one of the most remarkable buildings in England»<sup>3</sup>, while Reyner Banham praised it as «the most imaginative and advanced community-building gesture»<sup>4</sup>. The Royal Institute of British Architects held a dedicated appraisal in 1963<sup>5</sup>, and later Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius described it as a «spectacular scheme»<sup>6</sup>. However, early surveys revealed resident dissatisfaction<sup>7</sup>, which deepened during the industrial decline of the 1970s and 1980s<sup>8</sup>. Despite this, the estate retained a positive public image. As «the moral crusade of Brutalism for a better habitat through built environment probably reaches its culmination at Park Hill»<sup>9</sup>, its socio-economic and physical decline was addressed through conservation-led restoration. In 1998, English Heritage granted Park Hill Grade II\* listed status, recognising its architectural, landscape, and urban significance<sup>10</sup>. From the 2000s, Urban Splash led a major regeneration project, converting some flats into student and luxury apartments and adding ground-floor commercial units, improving public perception and reinterpreting the estate’s communal ethos. Yet Urban Splash’s approach also prompted debate over material authenticity due to reductions to the iconic ‘streets in the sky’ and replacement of original brick panels and timber windows with anodised aluminium and expansive glazing. Following renovation, the estate has been reintegrated into city life, serving as a cultural catalyst and helping to counter the stigma often attached to twentieth-century social housing. Nevertheless, questions remain about the rigour of these transformations, showing that listing status alone cannot guarantee the preservation of material integrity which is central to a building’s identity.





Fig. 2 Sheffield, Park Hill, One of the access decks in ROY DARKE, JANE DARKE, *Sheffield Revisited*, «Built Environment», vol. 1, n. 8, November 1972, p. 561.



Fig. 3 Sheffield, Park Hill, The façade today, (photo by A. Liivet). CC0 Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=63978922>.

### Robin Hood Gardens in London: Ideology and Conservation Failure

Robin Hood Gardens, located in Poplar, East London, represents the Smithsons' only realised public housing project and stands as a key example of New Brutalism in Britain<sup>11</sup>, exemplifying the 'rough poetry' for which the movement is known<sup>12</sup>. Constructed between 1968 and 1972 by the Greater London Council, the estate deliberately challenged established conventions, departing from the sterile functionalism of pre-war modernism.

The masterplan comprises two blocks, ten and seven storeys high, arranged around a central garden conceived as a semi-private, defensible space inspired by Oscar Newman<sup>13</sup>. As the architects stated, «the theme of Robin Hood Gardens is protection»<sup>14</sup>, reflecting both the practical need to shield residents from noise and the ethical aim of fostering a supportive environment to nurture neighbourly bonds denied by conventional rationalist design. Like Park Hill, the estate includes duplex flats and maisonettes connected by external access decks, embodying the Smithsons' streets-in-the-sky concept. Following the principles of New Brutalism, exposed concrete assumes a central expressive role: its raw, unrefined texture symbolises the alienation of individuals within the modern urban condition<sup>15</sup>.

However, from the outset, Robin Hood Gardens faced significant challenges. Derided by critics, neglected by local authorities, vandalised, and often disapproved of by many residents, the estate underwent a steady process of physical and social decline<sup>16</sup>. By 2007, escalating real estate and speculative pressures in East London prompted the London Borough of Tower Hamlets – then the site's owner – to propose demolition and replacement with the Blackwall Reach development. This decision ignited one of the most heated debates in the UK over Brutalist conservation, with preservation campaigns led by prominent architects including Zaha Hadid,



Fig. 4 Demolition of Robin Hood Gardens, Cotton Street, (photo by S. Richards, 2018).



Fig. 5 London, Robin Hood Gardens façade at V&A East Storehouse, (photo by The wub, 2025). Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robin\\_Hood\\_Gardens\\_facade,\\_V%26A\\_East\\_Storehouse\\_\(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robin_Hood_Gardens_facade,_V%26A_East_Storehouse_(2).jpg).

Richard Rogers, and the Smithsons' son, Simon<sup>17</sup>. In autumn 2007, the Twentieth Century Society (20CS) applied for Grade II\* listing – a bid that ultimately failed and was renewed without success in 2015, following English Heritage's refusal to recommend designation<sup>18</sup>. In the absence of legal protection, demolition proceeded: the western block was dismantled in 2017, and the eastern block's demolition concluded between 2024 and March 2025. Amid the controversy, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) acquired two maisonettes – equivalent to a three-storey section of the original façade – which were dismantled, reassembled, and exhibited at the 16<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale of Architecture as *Robin Hood Gardens: A Ruin in Reverse*<sup>19</sup>. While the fragment conveys the building's iconic image and its structural and material identity – qualities that Banham identified as defining features of Brutalism, and which would otherwise have been lost<sup>20</sup> – it also raises questions about detaching architectural elements from their socio-spatial context, diverting attention from the more fundamental issue: the failed preservation of the estate as a whole.

### **Final Remarks: Heritage, Social Perception, and the Challenges of Preserving Modernist Housing**

The cases of Park Hill and Robin Hood Gardens demonstrate the decisive role of public perception in the preservation of architecture. At Park Hill, the cultural significance of the original design and the recognition of distinctive features – such as the elevated walkways – outweighed the estate's temporary decline. At Robin Hood Gardens, by contrast, similar civic ambitions and architectural quality were overshadowed by social challenges and vigorous public debate, despite high-profile preservation efforts.

However, these outcomes also reflect the differing urban and economic contexts in which the two estates

evolved. Robin Hood Gardens stood in an area of East London subject to increasing development pressures and rising land values, which framed demolition as a profitable and politically expedient choice. Park Hill, by contrast, occupied a less competitive real-estate environment in Sheffield, where limited private investment and a lower degree of gentrification allowed heritage protection and adaptive reuse to emerge as viable alternatives to redevelopment. These contrasting conditions crucially shaped each estate's fate, demonstrating how preservation decisions are never purely cultural or aesthetic, but also profoundly economic and territorial.

This underscores that the conservation of twentieth-century architecture remains a contested issue, particularly for works associated with avant-garde movements, or with building types that challenge modernist ideals of class and progress, such as New Brutalism and social housing. The dilemma is intensified when projects fail to fully achieve their intended social objectives – a common occurrence in public housing schemes. This complex interplay of social, political, and economic forces is exemplified by the two English case studies, yet resonates more broadly across Europe, where twentieth-century architectural experiments sought to address housing challenges through innovative design paradigms. The Vele di Scampia in Naples, for instance, show how architectural vision and formal merit may prove insufficient to secure a building's survival amid social and material decline. Ultimately, preserving modern architectural heritage requires not only technical and regulatory frameworks but also a shared cultural awareness of its social and symbolic value. The survival of such works depends on an evolving process of heritage-making that extends beyond aesthetic appreciation or public opinion to include active engagement from institutions, policymakers, and communities alike. Only through this collective and informed commitment can the vulnerable yet significant legacy of twentieth-century architecture be safeguarded within the changing fabric of contemporary cities.

<sup>1</sup> In the extensive bibliography on the subject, cf. *Park Hill Development*, «Architects' Journal», 23 August 1961, pp. 271–286; «Architectural Design», Special Issue, September 1961, pp. 380–415; REYNER BANHAM, *Park Hill Housing, Sheffield*, «Architectural Review», 130, 778, 1961, pp. 403–10; *Appraisal of Park Hill Redevelopment, Sheffield*, «RIBA Journal», 70, 7, 1963, pp. 281–286; *Housing at Park Hill and Hyde Park, Sheffield*, «Architects' Journal», 21 July 1965, pp. 157–170; MILES GLENDINNING, STEFAN MUTHESIUS, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press 1994.

<sup>2</sup> The theory of “streets in the sky” was proposed by the Smithsons for their Golden Lane competition project in London (1951–1952). It envisioned human-scale walkways wide enough to accommodate prams, encourage play, and foster social interaction. Cf. ALISON AND PETER SMITHSON, *Urban Structuring – The Studies of Alison and Peter Smithson*, London, Studio Vista 1967; ID., *The Charged Void:*



*Architecture*, New York, Monacelli Press 2001. However, recent research indicates that Park Hill's deck pattern does not replicate the nineteenth-century street network it aimed to emulate; instead, the design was shaped by liberal economic interests, moderating the political radicalism of the post-war welfare state. HOLLY SMITH, *Demythologising Park Hill, Sheffield*, «Architectural History», vol. 65, 2022, pp. 251–274.

<sup>3</sup> DAVID LEWIS, *Criticism*, «Architectural Design», September 1961, p. 397.

<sup>4</sup> REYNER BANHAM, *Park Hill Housing*, op. cit., p. 403.

<sup>5</sup> *Appraisal of Park Hill Redevelopment, Sheffield*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> MILES GLENDINNING, STEFAN MUTHESIUS, *Tower Block...*, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> *Park Hill: Occupier Reaction Study*, «Official Architecture and Planning», vol. 29, 2, February 1966, pp. 234–238; ANTHONY E. J. MORRIS, *Park Hill 1966: A Reappraisal*, ivi, pp. 224–231.

<sup>8</sup> During the 1970s, the Park Hill community experienced profound social change: traditional family structures, street life, and neighbourhood ties all diminished. The collapse of Sheffield's steel and coal industries in the 1980s resulted in the loss of 40,000 jobs, leaving many residents reliant on welfare support. Initial optimism gave way to mounting social and structural challenges, marking the estate's gradual decline. Cf. CEDRIC PRICE, *Park Hill: What's Next?*, London, The Architectural Association 1996.

<sup>9</sup> REYNER BANHAM, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, London, Architectural Press 1966, p.132.

<sup>10</sup> «The impact of the long, flat-topped structure rising above the city centre makes for one of Sheffield's most impressive landmarks. The result was Britain's first completed scheme of post-war slum clearance and the most ambitious inner-city development of its time» (Historic England, Official List Entry Park Hill, Non Civil Parish – 1246881 <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1246881> [11/8/2025]).

<sup>11</sup> In the comprehensive literature on the topic, cf. PETER EISENMAN, *Robin Hood Gardens–London E14*, «Architectural Design», vol. 42, September 1972, pp. 557–573, 588–592; ALAN POWERS, *Robin Hood Gardens Re-visions*, London, Twentieth Century Society 2010; NICHOLAS THOBURN, *Brutalism as Found: Housing, Form and Crisis at Robin Hood Gardens*, London, Goldsmiths Press 2022.

<sup>12</sup> ALISON AND PETER SMITHSON, JANE B. DREW, EDWIN MAXWELL FRY, *Conversation on Brutalism*, «Zodiac», 4, 1959, pp. 73–81; ALISON AND PETER SMITHSON, *The New Brutalism*, «Architectural Design», vol. 27, April 1957, p. 113. Building on their progressive experience with the Independent Group since the early 1950s, the Smithsons sought to redefine the relationship between architecture and society through residential typologies. This research evolved further with the formation of Team X in 1953, proposing an update to the four functional categories of the Athens Charter—from living, working, leisure, and transportation to dwelling, street, district, and city.

<sup>13</sup> OSCAR NEWMAN, *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention Through Urban Design*, New York, The Macmillan Company 1972.

<sup>14</sup> The Alison and Peter Smithson Archive. Gift of Smithson Family, 2003. Robin Hood Gardens. Folder BA184, Page APS\_BA184\_0001 (seq. 1). Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Design <<https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn:3:gsd.loeb:101456585>> [11/8/2025].

<sup>15</sup> Cf. NICHOLAS THOBURN, *Brutalism as Found*, op. cit.; ID., *Concrete and council housing. The class architecture of Brutalism 'as found' at Robin Hood Gardens*, «City», vol. 22, no. 5–6, 2018, pp. 612–632.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. JESSIE BRENNAN, *Regeneration! Conversations, Drawings, Archives & Photographs from Robin Hood Gardens*, London, Silent Grid 2015; JONATHAN GLANCEY, *Is London's Robin Hood Gardens an architectural Masterpiece?*, «The Guardian», 29 July 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2009/jul/28/robin-hood-gardens-architecture>> [11/8/2025]; NICHOLAS THOBURN, *Brutalism as Found*, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> During the early stages of the preservation campaign led by the 20CS, then Culture Minister Margaret Hodge openly opposed efforts to preserve the building, stating that its «functional failures are fundamental» (MATTHEW WEAVER, *Robin Hood Gardens: iconic or eyesore?*, «The Guardian», 1st July 2008 <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/blog/2008/jul/01/robinhoodgardensnotfitfor>> [11/8/2025]). In May 2009, her successor, Andy Burnham, reiterated this view and issued a Certificate of Immunity from listing, preventing the structure from being reconsidered for designation for at least five years.

<sup>18</sup> Among the reasons cited by English Heritage for not listing the building—which were subsequently challenged in opposition reports by the Twentieth Century Society (20CS)—were the following: «insufficient aesthetic quality», «Specific design aesthetic faults», the limited «significance of street decks (...) less successfully realized here than at Sheffield's Park Hill» and «The absence of coverage [which] implies that the development was not perceived to be worthy of comment».

<sup>19</sup> The V&A's exhibition initiatives have attracted considerable—though occasionally contentious—editorial attention, as evidenced by a broad range of both academic and popular publications, including, but not limited to: CHRISTOPHER TURNER, *A Small Segment of a Masterpiece*, «V&ABlog», 6 March 2018 <<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/a-small-segment-of-a-masterpiece-2>> [11/8/2025]; TRISTRAM HUNT, *Displaying the Ruins of Demolished Social Housing at the Venice Architecture Biennale Is Not "Art-washing"*, «The Art Newspaper», 28 May 2018 <<https://www.theart-newspaper.com/comment/displaying-the-ruins-of-demolished-social-housing-is-not-art-washing-the-v-and-a-is-a-place-for-unsafe-ideas>> [11/8/2025]; NICHOLAS THOBURN, *Salvage Brutalism: Class, Culture and Dispossession in the Victoria and Albert Museum's Fragment of Robin Hood Gardens*, «Oxford Art Journal», vol. 45, n. 2, 2022, pp. 233–251; VIVIANA SAITTO, *Oltre la demolizione. L'acquisizione e l'allestimento dell'alloggio e delle street in the sky dei Robin Hood Gardens di Alison e Peter Smithson*, «do.co.mo.mo. Italia giornale», n. 36, 2022, pp. 13–18.

<sup>20</sup> REYNER BANHAM, *The New Brutalism*, «Architectural Review», December 1955, p. 361.