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The Everyday and 'Other' Spaces:

Low-rise High-density Housing Estates in Camden

Luis Diaz

University of Brighton

April 2005

I. Introduction

Between 1965 and 1973 in the London borough of Camden nine remarkable housing projects were designed and built under the tenure of the borough architect Sydney Cook.¹ These projects stood in stark contrast to post-war models of housing. They were intended to avoid the problems of alienation, physical deterioration and social disorder attributed to pre-fabricated point blocks and slabs. Initially praised for their inventiveness by architects, critics and tenants, the Camden projects later came under increasing criticism from all three groups. Ultimately these same projects were used as examples in arguments against the idea of social housing. In 1981, as the last large estate was being finished, Camden announced that it would not build any more 'disasters'.² While many factors account for this particular history, including political interests, cultural changes, and economic forces, the building forms and configurations of the estates were directly criticised and blamed for their 'failure.' This criticism, as a form of environmental determinism, is untenable. This is not to say that form is irrelevant. Since the publication of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* we understand that the relationship between built forms and social practices is part of a complex dialectic. It is still, however, a difficult task to identify the exact nature of the intersection between the built order and spatial practices.

This study will use two complimentary concepts to explore this intersection: the first is Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias and the second Michel de Certeau's conception of the everyday. The first is primarily understood as a spatial condition (although not exclusively) while the second is seen to consist of practices in space. The Camden projects were selected because they were

¹ A number of these projects were completed after Cook's premature retirement (due to illness). The projects are the estates at (date of design in brackets): Alexandra Road (1968), Branch Hill (1970), Elsfield Highgate Road (1968), Fleet Road (1966), Foundling Estate/Brunswick Centre (1965), Highgate New Town (1967), Lambie Street (1973), Mansfield Road and Polygon Court (1971). The Maiden Lane Estate, included in this analysis, was started in 1976 but is very much in the tradition of Cook's philosophy.

² Hugh Pearman, "Camden promise not to build any more disasters." *Building Design* (1981). Page not recorded.

conceived and realised at a critical historical moment that is characterised by a series of transitions. These transitions include: the movement from late modernism into postmodernism; from Labour to Conservative control of the government; from a belief in the efficacy of social housing to the abandonment of the programme; and the continuation of a transition towards a more ubiquitous consumer culture.³ In addition, the forms of Camden's housing estates were not realised accidentally; they were intentionally conceived as new kinds of territories. The concepts of heterotopias and the everyday will show that these territories are particularly complex ones. These complexities in will turn challenge the way we understand heterotopias, the everyday, and the ways in which they are related.

II. Methodology and terminology

This inquiry will utilise two Camden projects in varying levels of detail. At the moment they will operate as case studies although they will, as research continues, be developed into a comparative study incorporating other estates. The material has been gathered from literature reviews, multiple site visits over several years, and interviews with one of the architects. This is combined with critical analysis of the key concepts used. Although findings remain speculative and conceptual, it is expected to assist the development of a methodology for interrogating the relationship between spatial form and spatial practice.

The terms 'council housing' and 'social housing' are used interchangeably to mean housing produced, allocated and managed by the state. The former is used when relating specifically to an English context and the latter when referring to more general contexts. In general, the second term is preferable since it reinforces the idea of a social component. That is, I see social housing as having the characteristic of suggesting collective identities or providing arenas for social contact. 'Housing' is used to refer to the whole of the housing context, while emphasising social content.⁴ 'Spatial form' is used to mean the entirety of the arrangement of material forms and the spaces defined in and around them. 'Spatial practices' and 'practices', used interchangeably, mean those actions in space that both appropriate that space and make it emerge. This is nearer to the de Certeau's use of the term and is not to be confused with Lefebvre's 'spatial practice' as a category of space.

³ Some examples: Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* appears in 1966; Conservatives control parliament between 1970-73 and from 1979-1996; the Thatcher government cuts investment in council housing and the 'right to buy' act is introduced in 1980; the Parker Morris Report (1961) noted the changes to households caused by increasing ownership of consumer goods.

⁴ What this definition excludes is housing which is produced as a simple repetition of individual dwellings and which do not consciously propose a collective realm. I prefer this distinction to the urban/suburban division since these types are not necessarily geographically distinct. In this way housing refers more to an idea than a policy or type.

III. Notes on Heterotopias

It is not always recognised that Foucault's text 'Of Other Spaces' is not an essay but rather a set of lecture notes.⁵ It is, however, often observed that the definition of the concept of heterotopias is rough and sketchy. This characteristic is both an advantage and problem; although the concept can be adapted, adjusted or appropriated as necessary we are never sure how Foucault understood it or what limitations he may have recognised. It is worth reviewing some of the text in detail to establish what can be specifically said about heterotopias.

Heterotopias are one among many types of sites which are set apart by specific and complex relationships to all other sites.⁶ These relationships are the result of a double relation relative to the remaining sites. Heterotopias, along with utopias, are sites that

"...have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect."

That is, they exist by making (inventing) or suspending (neutralising or suspecting) a relationship that is first either 'marked' (designated) or reproduced (mirrored or reflected).

I suggest another interpretation of the French *désignés*, which is translated as 'designated'. Both the French *désigner* and English 'designate' can refer to naming or marking. However, *désigner* also refers to 'pointing to or indicating in such a way as to distinguish the thing indicated from all other things.' *Désigner* is not just an assignment of a name or a pointing to a place, but an act of marking and differentiating through exclusion. This definition, though abstract and complex, is the essence of heterotopias.

The remainder of Foucault's text proceeds in a more tangible manner. The most concrete aspect of heterotopias is that they are real places as opposed to the imaginary places of utopia.⁷ The text then discusses the characteristics of heterotopias and includes many examples of historical and contemporary heterotopias. The six principles are: 1) heterotopias may be either based on crises or deviance; 2) the function of a heterotopia may change over time; 3) several spaces may be

⁵ The origin of the text is somewhat of a mystery. The first published French version does not coincide exactly with an audio version of the lecture. The text was apparently provided by Foucault but not reviewed or edited for publication by him. The source of an audio extract of Foucault's lecture, available at <http://Foucault.info/>, is not given. It is possible that the audio extract is from a recording of a radio programme called 'Utopies réelles ou lieux et autres lieux' dated 7 December 1966.

⁶ I use the term 'site' for the French *emplacements*. This is in keeping with Jay Miskowiec's translation in *Diacritics*, which corresponds more closely with the French version. This translation differs significantly from the one which appeared in *Lotus* and which has been subsequently republished in Joan Ockman's *Architecture Culture* and Neil Leach's *Rethinking Architecture*. The translation used here is Miskowiec's; however, all key terms and concepts have been checked against the French version. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1. Translated by Jay Miskowiec (1986).

⁷ Foucault's notion of utopia is sketchy and minimal in both English and French versions. Utopia is posited as simply as an imaginary place. The audio extract, however, has an extended discussion of utopia, and other interpretations of the concept (for example, children's play). <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.espacesAutres.fr.mp3>

juxtaposed in a single heterotopia; 4) heterotopias are linked to 'slices of time'; 5) heterotopias have systems of opening and closing; and 6) they function in relation to all remaining space.

It is this list of principles that are easiest to grasp and, along with the examples (cemeteries, prisons, brothels, boats), are often taken as shorthand for the concept. It is easy at this point to see heterotopias as very specific sites rather than a type of relationship. It is worth noting that Foucault moves from site (*emplacement*) to place (*lieu*) to space (*l'espace*) without commenting on either their specific nature or relationship.⁸ This leaves these key terms open to interpretation.

Despite this vagueness, the concept of heterotopias is often taken to mean 'otherness', a condition of standing apart, of difference. Mary McLeod has criticised this simplified interpretation while identifying two tendencies.⁹ The first is a reliance on formal 'otherness' and the second a recourse to programmatic 'otherness'. Formal 'otherness' is based on dramatic visual difference while programmatic 'otherness' relies on making reference to Foucault's laundry list of heterotopias. In connection with the latter, McLeod finds that "[w]hat are explicitly omitted in his list of 'other' spaces, however, are the residence, the workplace, the street, the shopping centre, and the more mundane areas of everyday leisure, such as playgrounds, parks, sporting fields, restaurants, and cafes."¹⁰ Further, McLeod argues that 'otherness' is automatically assumed to be a positive value. While Foucault ends with the suggestion that the critical nature of heterotopias is beneficial, it cannot be forgotten that among the benign heterotopias (e.g. gardens) there are also less positive ones such as asylums and prisons. Following McLeod's suggestion, I turn now to the possibility of the residence, in the form of housing, as a heterotopia.

⁸ "Utopias are real sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society."

⁹ Mary McLeod, "Everyday and 'Other' Spaces," *Architecture and Feminism*, eds. Deborah Coleman, et al. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996) pp. 1-7.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 6.

IV. On some general conditions of housing

Housing can be seen as the background material of cities against which specialised functions are highlighted (fig. 1). Seen in this way we can consider housing part of the mundane and the everyday. Those elements that interrupt this field, festivals, spaces of religion or of the market, are extra-everyday and are given their own specific spaces. Whether this straightforward condition ever actually existed is questionable, nevertheless, it certainly hasn't survived to the present day.

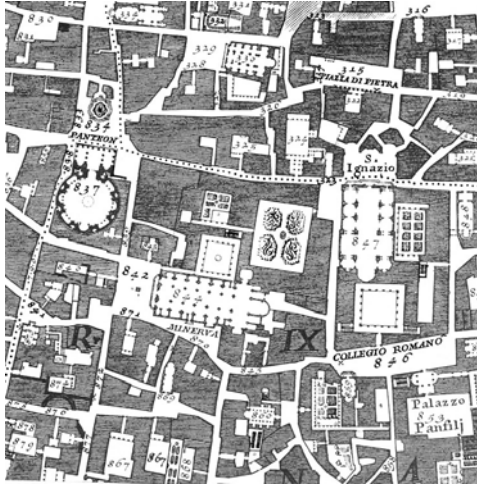


Fig. 1 Nolli Plan of Rome, 1748



Fig. 2 Charles Booth, Poverty Map of London, 1898-99

By the 19th century parts of the East End in London were seen as a foreign territory and its inhabitants less than human (fig. 2). In 1883 George Sims wrote of the East End that it was a 'dark continent.'

"This continent will...be found as interesting as any of the newly-explored lands which engage the attention of the Royal Geographical Society – the wild races who inhabit it will, I trust, gain public sympathy as easily as those savage tribes for whose benefit the Missionary Societies never cease to appear for funds."¹¹

These sites were as 'other' as any exotic foreign territory. Moreover, to those on the outside they were sites of deviance while they were sites of crisis for those who lived there (figs. 3 & 4). With the introduction of reform housing, the status of these heterotopias was transferred (and transformed) to these new sites, marked as places of transition into 'normal' society (fig. 5, 6 & 7). These new sites were in turn marked by new forms, such as courtyards or exposed staircases, intended to aid the surveillance and self-policing. These manoeuvres adopt and transform the same forms that were introduced, with utopian intentions, by J.B.A. Godin in France.

¹¹ George Sims quoted in Deborah Weiner, *Architecture and Social Reform in late-Victorian London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) p. 8.

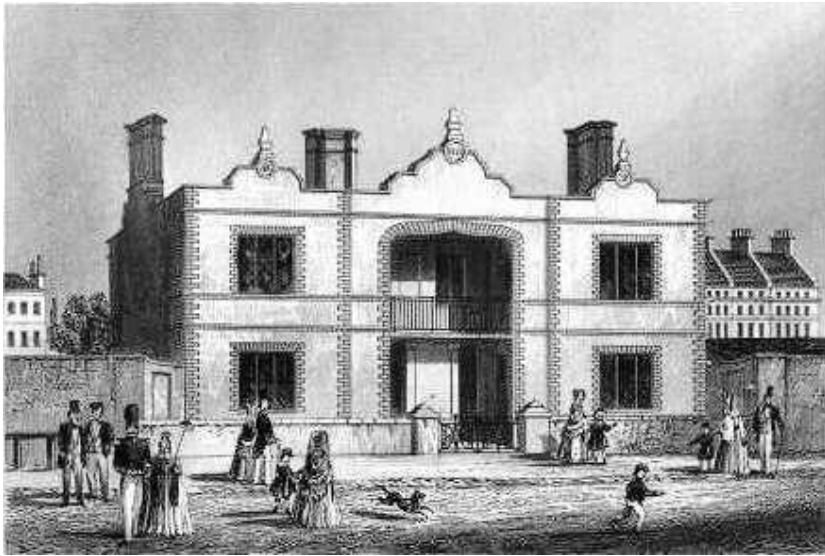


Fig. 3 top left: Little Collingwood Street, Bethnal Green, London, c1900.

Fig. 4 top right: Cat's meat man in an East End street, London, c1901-c1902.

Fig. 5 middle: Prince Albert Model Cottage, 1851

Fig. 6 bottom left: Corporation Building, Farringdon, c.1865

Fig. 7 bottom right: Peabody Square, Westminster, c.1869

This pattern repeated itself in the 20th century, with the identification of slums designated for clearance and replacement. These slums were replaced with forms of housing that broke radically with the spatial patterns of the city, i.e., slab blocks, point blocks, gallery access blocks, etc. (Figs. 8, 9, 10). If, because of their improved housing provision, they were not immediately identified as negative spaces, they were at least marked spatially and formally as 'other.'



Figs. 8, 9, 10: pre- and post-war housing types.

At the same time that problems with these estates were emerging the terrace house was mythologized as the standard and correct form of dwelling.¹² Looked at in these general terms council housing could only have been seen as an inferior form of dwelling.

There are political reasons why it was important to see council housing in this (negative) way. It had been recognised well before Thatcher that encouragement of owner-occupation was an effective method of redistributing wealth. In his analysis of housing economics and politics Martin Pawley notes that in 1914 “well over 80% of the 8,000,000 dwellings in England and Wales were rented to private tenants by private landlords: the remainder were owner occupied.”¹³ This was turned around by the Conservative administration between 1951 and 1964, so that private house construction out-performed council production. Pawley summarises this period:

“During those thirteen years the growth in owner occupation was so spectacular, and the general increase in wealth so evident that their socialist opponents abandoned the concept of housing as a social service for all citizens and began instead to consider it in that sense only in relation to the poorer part of the population.”¹⁴

¹² See for example, Nicholas Taylor, *The Village in the City* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1973).

¹³ Martin Pawley, “The Need for a Revolutionary Myth,” *Architectural Design*, no. 2 (1972) p. 73.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 74. See also John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985* (London: Methuen, 1986). Burnett writes: “In 1945 only 26 per cent of all houses in England and Wales were owner-occupied; by 1966 the proportion was 47 per cent, and in 1983 63 per cent.” p. 282.

In effect, the governments decided to stigmatise council housing. Yet despite the backlash that followed post-war housing construction, tenants did not necessarily view council housing as a negative condition. The adoption of Parker-Morris standards after 1961 led to a relatively high standard of accommodation. It is not difficult to imagine that families previously lacking proper housing would have been pleased to be relocated to newly-built council estates. But this positive reading goes beyond the functional necessity for decent accommodation. In a recent study of the Brunswick Centre housing estate, Clare Melhuish found that

“...there is a pervasive sense of reliance, even dependence on the council as an institution, not only for the welfare of the residential community, but also, in some sense, for its very identity as a cohesive group.”¹⁵

What this means is that although we may identify a heterotopia, those living within it may not necessarily see themselves in that light. For some, living on a council estate can mean that they have ‘arrived’; in other words, that they have attained the security that may be expected from having secure housing. It would take further research to determine to what extent those living on council estates see their condition as ordinary, everyday and not marked as ‘other.’ However, it is possible to surmise that because of the extreme housing shortage (and the poor condition of existing housing) immediately after the Second World War, that many would have seen council housing as a positive value.¹⁶

What we see after the war, however, is a shift in the location of crisis from London in general (an entire city as heterotopia) to council estates. As many post-war estates deteriorated socially and physically they became identified as problem estates, sink estates and hard-to-let estates. Lack of further investment, upkeep, and maintenance led to a general perception (assisted by the media) of estates as ‘other’ territories. However, this social perception has a physical counterpart. Physical ‘otherness’ can be established by formal configuration, construction technique, or by the site itself. The spatial and formal configurations of many post-war estates, in particular point blocks or slab blocks, set them apart from their surroundings. Pre-fabrication and other industrial techniques led to an aesthetic that was markedly different from those produced by traditional methods (fig. 11).

¹⁵ Clare Melhuish, “Towards a Phenomenology of the Concrete Megastructure: Space and Perception at the Brunswick Centre, London,” *Journal of Material Culture* 10, no. 1 (2005) p. 26.

¹⁶ Anne Power provides the following figures: 750,000 homes demolished or damaged by the war; two-thirds of the entire housing stock dated from before the First World War and needing repair. Anne Power, *Property Before People, The Management of Twentieth-Century Housing* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987) p. 40.



Fig. 11: Pre-fabricated housing estate



Fig. 12: Map of bomb damage after WWII

But perhaps most importantly, many sites used for council estates in London were bombsites – sites that were already marked as scars in the urban tissue (fig. 12). These conditions, in fact, make it possible that even healthy estates were largely seen as ‘other’ territories standing outside the ‘normality’ of the city. Even as quasi-utopian constructions, these sites were probably seen as critical of the city as a whole. In this way, social housing can be said to resemble Foucault’s mirror, both utopia and heterotopia at the same time.

“The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. [...] The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.”

V. Notes on the Everyday

“The everyday is therefore a concept.”¹⁷

What remains when one isolates heterotopias should not be mistaken for the everyday. The relationship between the two concepts is not one of opposition. Heterotopias are primarily spatial (relationships) whereas the everyday is rooted in practices. The everyday can refer to material things, to places, but cannot be located in them. It consists of, in Lefebvre’s work, a series of tensions that have unpredictable outcomes. Nevertheless, Lefebvre’s emphasis is on the oppressive and alienating aspects of the everyday. That alienation comes from the uniformity that is the result

¹⁷ Henri Lefebvre, “Everyday and Everydayness,” *Architecture of the Everyday*, eds. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997) p. 35.

of increased rationalisation of all spheres of life. In the past, relationships, functions and structures existed unnamed, while modern processes name in order to identify, separate and order reality.¹⁸ These names (signs) replace real things, including social structures as well as material reality. Lefebvre believed that beneath these signs there exists something 'concrete' called the everyday and that its overwhelming characteristic is repetition (routines and cycles).

"The everyday imposes its monotony."¹⁹

This monotonous regime and commodification of the everyday is not easily categorised. Lefebvre saw both work and leisure regimented and controlled in the same way.²⁰ It is also pervasive; Lefebvre sees commodification infiltrating nearly every aspect of everyday life.

Michel de Certeau focused on the way in which routines are transformed and manipulated by individuals as acts of resistance and as generators of meaning. Put another way, Lefebvre defines the system and structure of everyday life while de Certeau focuses on the practices within that structure. The most widely known example is that of walking practices; walkers exist within a built environment that they explore while denying some possibilities and inventing others. De Certeau calls this 'walking rhetorics' which suggests the possibility of creativity.²¹

Now while space is implicated in both Lefebvre and de Certeau work, space is neither a container nor a generator for the everyday. The everyday, above all, is an activity. What this means is that there is no such thing as 'architecture of the everyday' or 'everyday architecture'. You can, however, have an everyday critique of architecture.²²

While Lefebvre's contributions are of great importance in understanding the power relations which are embedded in space, de Certeau provides a model that examines this relationship in practice. Namely, de Certeau theorises the moment when the power relations are revealed and exercised; this is the moment when the desires of an individual are confronted with the possibilities and restrictions of built things.

"First, if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities and interdictions, then the walker actualises some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well as emerge. But he also moves them about and he invents others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements."²³

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 32.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 36.

²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. 1*, translated John Moore (London: Verso, 1991) p. 29.

²¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). In particular see chapter VII "Walking in the City," pp. 91-110.

²² I borrow this form from Manfredo Tafuri, who wrote that there is no class architecture, only class criticism of architecture.

²³ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.98.

VI. Notes on the evolution of housing types

Although individual houses accounted for a large proportion of housing and were as problematic as flat estates, it was the latter that drew more attention and criticism. Moreover, it was the communal elements themselves, those spaces that are specific to the idea of communal living, which were singled out as problematic. Anne Power lists decks and bridges, lifts, communal entrances, and garages as spaces that were routinely found to be dirty, vandalised or neglected.²⁴ The rationalisation of everyday life, that Lefebvre identified, can be seen at play here. Every aspect of moving around the residential environment is isolated and given its own form (and its form designed and signed). This rationalisation, an extension of CIAM's functionalist approach to the built environment, was criticised from within the architectural community, the most well known example being Team X. Concerned about the social effects of this rational and functional system, Team X members Peter and Alison Smithson reintroduced the concepts of neighbourhood, district, and street into architectural discourse. This was meant to act as a corrective to the alienating territories that were produced by the spaces of detached point blocks and slabs on abstract ground planes.

However, although they reintroduced connective and relational concepts in theory, in practice the separation of everyday practices persisted. For example, a typical entry sequence in a post-war estate could be described as: moving off the street (city) across a boundary into the territory of the estate; traversing the informal territory of the estate; arriving at an entry lobby, opening a door and entering; waiting and ascending via elevator; walking along a gallery or access balcony past a series of doors; arriving in front of your door and entering. Including the street there are six distinct spaces in this sequence (street, estate, lobby, elevator, lobby, gallery) (fig. 13). In addition, none of these spaces overlap. This pattern remained essentially unchanged despite the introduction of concepts such as streets-in-the-air. The transformation of entry sequences, and thus, the relationship of the dwelling to the city, dates back to the access balcony estates of the 1930s. A general review of housing over the last 150 years would demonstrate a series of experiments and transformations of the entry sequence and the varying ways in which these are perceived as belonging to the city, the block and the unit.

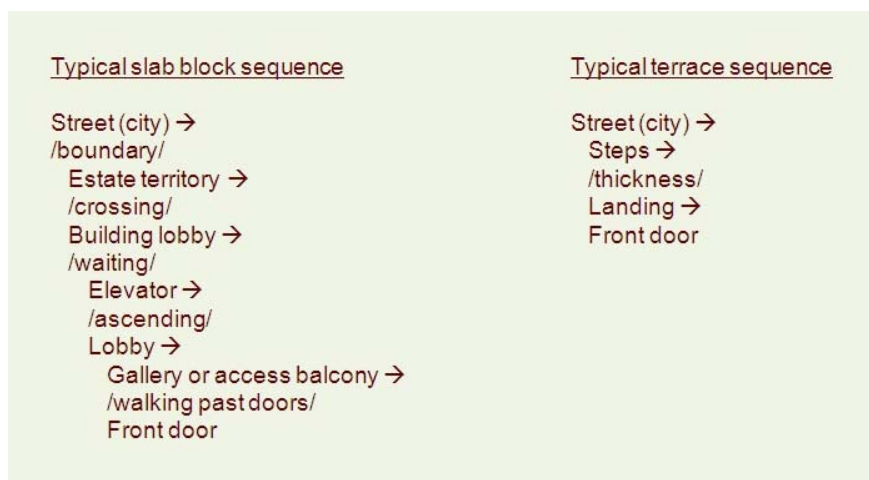


Fig. 13: Diagram of entry sequences for slab block and traditional terrace

²⁴ Anne Power, *Property Before People*, pp. 142-145.

In the 1960s a different approach emerged that transformed the space of estates to a degree not seen since the introduction of the isolated tower block. By filling more of any given site and remaining low in height, low-rise high-density estates modified the relationships between public and private and the dwelling and block (and its estate).

VII. The Camden 'White' Terrace Estates: Two Studies

The low-rise high-density approach has been traced back to Le Corbusier's *Roq et Rob* project (1949), although a more direct influence was the housing district, *Siedlung Halen* in Bern, Switzerland by Atelier 5 (1959-61).²⁵ Although too much has been made of this genealogy, Neave Brown, the architect of two Camden schemes, did review the project for *Architectural Design* in 1963.²⁶ It was, however, a largely negative appraisal. A likely source was the influence of the Smithsons at the Architectural Association, and more precisely, the way in which they acted as conduits for the ideas of other members of Team X. Student projects from the 1950s show an interest in the kind of network and carpet schemes favoured by Candilis, Josic and Woods.

Although low-rise high-density schemes had been adopted in other London boroughs, the head architect of the Camden County Council, Sydney Cook, used it exclusively.²⁷ Between 1965, when he took over the newly formed council, and 1973 Cook did not initiate a single high-rise housing scheme.

The scale, size and spatial configurations of low-rise high-density schemes are closer to traditional forms of housing and should mean that as territories would appear less separate and distinct from their surrounding. In Camden, however, this was not the case as nearly all the architects adopted an unapologetic modernist vocabulary favouring concrete, white surfaces and strip windows. In addition, many projects utilised stepped sections to cope with site gradients as well as complex internal sections, both of which set the projects apart from the upright, vertical stature of Georgian and Victorian terraces. Furthermore, most of the projects are based on variations of the terrace type, incorporating back gardens and entry doors leading directly to the exterior (i.e., no access galleries or lobbies).

Two projects will be examined in greater detail: The Brunswick Centre, designed by Patrick Hodgkinson (1965-1972), and Alexandra Road, designed by Neave Brown. These are the two of the largest estates built by Camden during the 1960s and 1970s, both exceeding 500 dwellings.

²⁵ See Kenneth Frampton, "The evolution of housing concepts, 1870-1970" *A + U*, no. 9 (1977) pp. 24-32.

²⁶ Neave Brown, "Siedlung Halen and the eclectic predicament," *Architectural Design*, February (1962) p. 62.

²⁷ Stephen Games, "Cook's Camden," *RIBA Journal*, November (1979).

a. The Brunswick Centre



Aerial of the Brunswick Centre

The Brunswick Centre did not start out as a council project. Camden council became involved after start of the design and agreed to lease the housing portion of the project from its private owners. Nevertheless, the project with its stepped section and low rise approach was the kind of project that could have been commissioned by Cook. However, the project is not entirely in the spirit of other Camden work; the most important difference is that entry to the dwellings is via a lobby and access galleries. The Brunswick Centre is very much a transitional project, sitting halfway between the earlier abstract and monolithic approaches of modernism and more ambiguous and fragmented method of Cook's Camden.

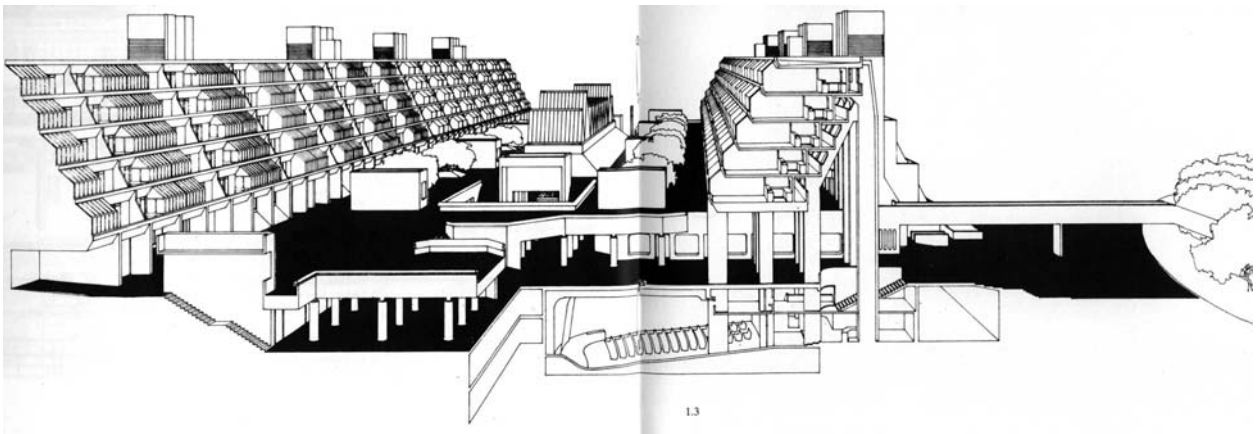


Fig. 14: Cross-section perspective of the Brunswick Centre with unbuilt bridge to the right.

The first impression of the Brunswick Centre, sited in the middle of Georgian Bloomsbury, is shocking. Comprising two parallel seven storey concrete blocks, it is uncompromising in form, scale and material. Its expression is that of a highly unified and grand statement. Its reception and reputation has been mixed; the estate has one of the most complex public/private relationships of any estate in London (fig. 14). The ground floor commercial area is owned privately while the

housing above is leased by Camden.²⁸ This arrangement was established in 1965, and has been complicated by the recent (1999) resale of the ground floor²⁹ and the 'right to buy' policy introduced by the Thatcher government. In addition, the first several levels of housing are reserved for sheltered housing (housing for the elderly with some limited services provided on site). This means that what appears as a unified concrete statement is in fact a series of territories of differing scales operating under different kinds of rules.



Figs. 15 & 16: Two views of the internal shopping concourse

Clare Melhuish has noted that these territories are organised in section, resulting in an 'upstairs-downstairs' type of class segregation.³⁰ She also notes that there the two parallel blocks have developed separate identities.

"Residents of Foundling Court [the west building] queried why support should be given to O'Donnell Court [the east building] over the 'lean-to' building, when O'Donnell had not supported Foundling in its battle to stop the hotel opposite building additional storeys which would block light and views out towards the horizon from the upper levels. This division is crystallized by Mr M, when he refers to 'the two estates'."³¹

Melhuish explains that the original design included a continuous terrace at the first floor level that could have allowed for closer contact between the two buildings.

How do we interpret the coincidence of configuration between physical form and social patterns? Such social divisions can emerge in any structure and does not require a corresponding physical component. For example, antagonistic allegiances and groups are often found in public and private housing co-operatives. This does not mean, however, that form is insignificant: it simply needs to be seen in its context. That is, the two blocks face different contexts and have been threatened in different ways. Foundling Court faces Marchmont Street, which is lined with small shops, and was threatened by a hotel development. O'Donnell Court faces the open space of Brunswick Square,

²⁸ Peter Murray, "Foundling Estate, Bloomsbury," *Architectural Design*, no. 10 (1971) p. 606.

²⁹ Melhuish, "Towards a Phenomenology of the Concrete Megastructure," p. 27.

³⁰ Ibid. pp. 26-27.

³¹ Ibid. p. 20.

and was threatened by a 'lean-to' block of flats. It is not necessarily a problem that the two sides should see their relationship to their context differently, unless the success of the entire complex is contingent on its physical and social identity remaining intact. To what extent then do dwellings need to cohere as collective units? To answer this we need to understand what Hodgkinson's intended and how this coincides with the forms he produced.



Fig. 17: Marchmont Street view

Melhuish tells us that Hodgkinson was more interested in the individual than in social ideals.³² Yet Hodgkinson seems to contradict himself:

“The early schemes for the Brunswick were socially idealistic, intended to incorporate a wide mixture of people from different social strata, within the equalizing framework of a common building type framing a common public space, or ‘town room’. Hodgkinson described it (1972) as ‘a liner without class distinctions on its promenading decks’.”³³

There is a clear social intention suggested by the way individual dwellings are related to each other and to the whole. This reflects the project as built and the way that its two main parts are configured. The flats are expressed externally as nearly identical despite internal differences in flat size. This reinforces the ‘equalizing framework’. The housing is then collected and framed on the concourse-cum-plinth providing collective space.

However, in the original design this collective space was meant to be above street level, separate from the urban ground. The intention of the shopping concourse, as designed and built, was to link with its surroundings.³⁴ The formal resolution at all scales and the aesthetic expression sets the project apart from its surroundings. This results in levels where the project is connective (movement of people) and disconnecting (visual).

³² “He felt strongly that a modern architecture should concern itself with the psyche of the individual, rather than being a vehicle for socialism.” Ibid. pp. 12-13.

³³ Ibid. p.13.

³⁴ I do not disagree with Richard Sennett’s interpretation of the Brunswick Centre concourse, which sees it as separate from its urban context. He writes: “The ‘public’ concourse of the Centre is in fact shielded from the main contiguous Bloomsbury streets by two immense ramps with fences edging them; the concourse itself is raised several feet above street level.” My reading of the concourse is as it was intended to be used or perceived. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) p. 13.

There is an ambiguity in the resolution of the concourse and its relation to its surroundings. It was intended from the outset to be linked to a wider context.³⁵ The Brunswick Centre opens onto three streets at three points, yet the concourse is raised above the level of the street. The one gesture that straddles the boundary of inside and outside, the cinema, is located away from the main pedestrian activity on the quietest street. The result is not the most straightforward.



Fig. 18: Movement paths

“During the construction of the Brunswick, graffiti was painted on the site hoardings, dubbing it the ‘Bloomsbury Prison’.”³⁶

“One of the most frequently heard epithets used by residents to describe their experience of living in the Brunswick is that of the ‘concrete jungle’.”³⁷



³⁵ “Their perception [the residents] of the Brunswick as a localized focus of universal interests, and the corresponding plans for upgrading the complex, aspire to a resurrection of the original intention of the development, as a grand, formal axis and public space between nodes of mass transportation which even, at one stage, included a passenger terminal for Heathrow.” Melhuish, “Towards a Phenomenology of the Concrete Megastructure,” p.27.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 14.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 18.

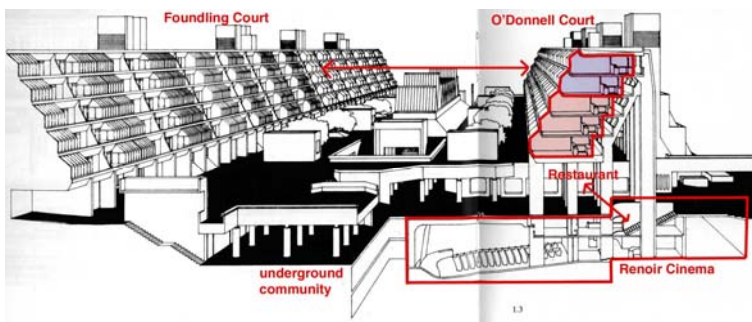
It is beyond doubt that the estate is 'other' from a visual standpoint, but there are historical factors that layer on top of this. One is that it is well known as representative of a particular ideology of housing. It is an icon of modern architecture and this leads to the second, which is the fact that the structure has been listed since 2000. Once we are aware of this, the site becomes sacred territory, a minor museum piece. It is not, from this point of view, an everyday part of the city.

Having lived nearby, I can attest to the way in which the centre connected and participated with the local area and beyond. The concourse has the only supermarket and cinema in the neighbourhood attracting people from the surrounding area. The other shops fared poorly and did not offer anything that could be found nearby. Recently, however, a high profile used-bookshop has moved into the centre. The two main access points located on opposite sides connect a small scale shopping street (hardware store, local post office, restaurants) with a large park on the opposite side (Coram's Fields); this is often used as a shortcut to get from one to the other providing a low, but constant flow of people (fig. 18). The entries to dwellings are located on the street side; the residents are related to the street but not the concourse, and their relationship to the concourse is the same as non-residents, i.e., as a shopping precinct. This also means that residents of each block enter on opposite streets - not a problem in itself except that the one place where the two sides can cross paths is on the concourse. However, their status is the same as anyone else who enters the concourse - they are all outsiders.

Finally, Marchmont Street, with its small shops bustles with activity and continues north past the Brunswick Centre, leading towards the British Library. The centre, oriented inwards towards its mall, does not formally address any of this activity. Ironically, the shops on Marchmont Street have survived while those on the concourse struggled (many have remained empty).

The results of all this are a series of oppositions (inside/outside; residential/commercial; public/private) that never stabilize, and even more, are reversible. For example, the concourse is connected and disconnected; the estate belongs and doesn't belong; the flats are equalised, but the blocks are opposed.

The status of the Brunswick Centre never settles or fades into the background. Nearly every condition is negated or modified by another. Though ambiguous and at times confusing, it still contributes to the neighbourhood. It connects with small gestures; entries, shopping, short cuts, everyday and routine activities. These qualities, a combination of heterotopia and everyday connectedness, are quite possibly what have allowed the project to adapt and survive.



Figs. 19-20: Diagrams of different uses and tenant groupings

b. Alexandra Road

"It is hoped that the project will be recognised more for its normality than its conspicuous newness."³⁸



Two views of Alexandra Road's main block

On first sight Alexandra Road appears monolithic and overwhelming, although in many respects it is the most traditional of the Camden estates. The estate comprises three linear blocks, the longest at 450 metres, organised along two pedestrian streets (Rowley Way and Ainsworth Way) and incorporating a 1.6-hectare park in between (fig. 21). In addition, there is a cluster of community services at the east end of the site including a community centre, school, shops, youth club, play centre, children's centre and buildings department depot. The dwellings in each block are based on the terrace model, many of them with back gardens and all of them with entries leading directly to the street. The architect, Neave Brown, consciously modelled the organisation of the estate on Regency residential neighbourhoods.³⁹

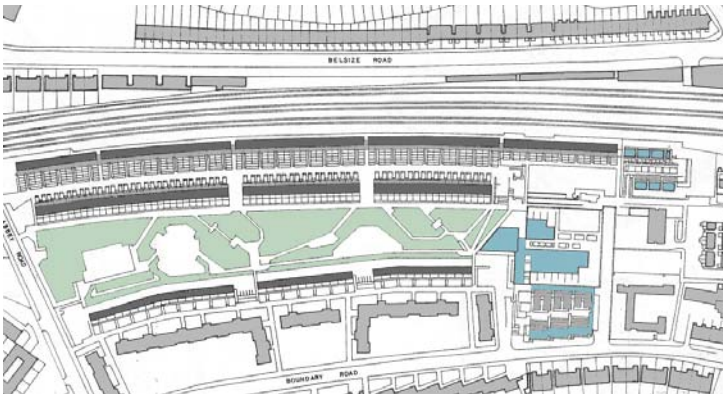


Fig. 21: Site plan

³⁸ Neave Brown, "Neave Brown, Alexandra Road, Fleet Road, Winscombe Street," *A+U*, November (1980) p. 7.

³⁹ Some of the information here is based on an interview and discussions with the architect between 1998-2001. Brown is very clear in interviews and lectures about the sources of his ideas. He introduces nearly every aspect in terms of earlier references, borrowed ideas or details.

The project is often discussed in relation to two previous ones, the five-unit project at Winscombe Street and the 74 units at Fleet Road. There are a number of similar themes, but in many respects Alexandra Road is most similar to Winscombe Street. In particular, there is a preoccupation with the entry sequence and movement system at Winscombe, which carries over to Alexandra Road.



Fig. 22: Winscombe Street

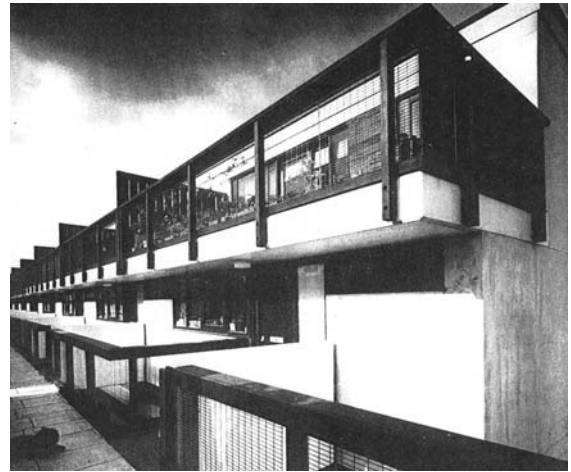


Fig. 23: Fleet Road

The relationship of the dwelling to the street was an important issue for Brown, who saw it vital that every unit be directly accessible from the street. To this end there are no lobbies or corridors, no internal circulation system apart from lifts which give access to the topmost dwellings of the northern block. Brown believes that this direct relationship is a fundamental necessity and that it must be present no matter how complex the programme or site.⁴⁰ This becomes particularly difficult in the northern block, backing the rail line, which comprises 5 stacked dwellings in 7 storeys. Although elevator access is provided, the intended means of access is via the highly articulated stairs. These stairs ride up the façade, sometimes in straight runs, sometimes switching back and providing landings that jut out from the setback profile of the building to provide balcony-like stopping points. These stairs are meant to have the same public status as the streets, and to this end they are not enclosed or formed as an 'inside'. This recalls the opening up of enclosed stairwells by the Victorians, deliberately exposing to view, and making public, what was previously a hidden semi-private world.⁴¹

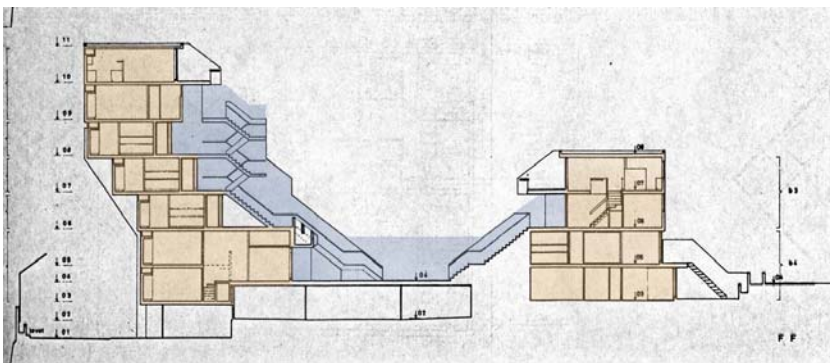


Fig. 24. Section at Block A & B

⁴⁰ It is interesting that Brown is less comfortable speaking about Fleet Road, which is more complicated formally and spatially, and whose movement system is labyrinthine. Oddly enough, it is Fleet Road which seems to have influenced Benson and Forsyth, who built four projects for Camden.

⁴¹ This is one reference that Brown has not explicitly made.

It could be argued that there is little conceptual difference between this configuration and those of gallery access blocks. However, even where access galleries are conceived as streets-in-the-air, you often enter a lobby and ascend via elevator to reach them. This results in a break with the environment at ground level that is difficult to re-establish. No matter how public a street-in-the-air is intended to be, it is separated spatially, psychologically and through bodily practice. This is not to suggest that the circulation at Alexandra Road is successful simply because it avoids this configuration. The intention, however, is clear: the stairs are not primarily conceived pragmatically. They are defined architecturally and spatially as vertical extensions of the street, occupying voids between the 'solids' of paired terraces (figs 25 & 26).



Fig. 25: General view block A

Fig. 26: Stair access block A

Fig. 27: Access to block B

What is curious is that the entries to the lower blocks (block B) are yet more articulated even though it would seem they would require it less. Each pair of upper maisonettes is reached by a single concrete stair that leads up to a shared open vestibule (fig. 27). The lower pair of maisonettes is reached by individual concrete steps leading to a bridge that lands on a shared open vestibule. There is also the option of going down a set of steps to separate but connected lower courtyards that give access to the bedrooms. Layered onto this sequence are a set multiple and overlapping of spatial 'readings'. These relate alternately to individual dwellings and to their shared spaces, both real and virtual. The articulation of these entry sequences can be seen as celebration of the act of arriving. However, by celebrating this practice it is lifted out of the everyday; this activity is now a framed ritual and the space becomes a stage. Arriving at your dwelling is transformed from a practice to a performance. One passes through a series of signifying spaces - some suggesting the individual and others suggesting the community.



Fig. 28: General view of block B



Fig. 29: Outline of upper unit and stair



Fig. 30: Interlocking of paired units



Fig. 31: Entry and unit overlap

All of this could be read as a method of producing multiplicity, of overlaying various meanings and articulations from which inhabitants could choose. Yet the resolution of details suggests that there is something else going on. For example, the metal railings and balustrades are detailed so that there is a clear distinction between elements that support and those that are supported. In addition, each material is given a clear role - wood, metal and concrete have assigned roles and never waver from this system. All of this recalls Lefebvre's distinction between named and the unnamed. Screen, connection, support, and structure - each element is singular in role, named and assigned to a specific job. If there is ambiguity in spatial articulation, there is none in the articulation of individual elements.⁴²



Figs. 32 & 33: Railing details

⁴² The Winscombe Street project provides a useful example: three spiral stairs are provided for each unit, each made from different materials, concrete for the entry, wood for the interior, and metal for the back yard.

A possible explanation for this is the desire to produce specific relationships and readings between the individual and the collective. There has always been interplay between part and whole and an exploration of overlap, in Brown's work: for example, at Winscombe Street the upper storey is treated as a unified horizontal block while each individual concrete entry stair is partially in front of the neighbouring unit (fig. 22). Brown avoids clear identification of individual units. They can be picked out, but they are spatially and formally embedded and woven into a larger figure. To make this legible Brown has developed a precise visual language, simple in its individual terms, in order to weave a complex spatial story.

All of this could be said of Georgian terraces: they also articulate entrances in a similar fashion, for example, in the way they bridge over areaways (figs 34 & 35). There is a distinct materiality to the building (brick) and the entry (metal). But here the similarities end. Each of these elements belongs to other territories: brick belongs to a larger family of buildings; the metal railings at the entry are also part of a continuous screen of fencing. The railings are also related to those used around parks and squares. The form, articulation and detailing allows for a symbolic link between the individual terrace and the myth it represents: the neo-classical villa. At Alexandra Road, there are few of these extended readings.



Fig. 34 & 35: Georgian terraces

In terms of the spatial practices of entering the estate and arriving at the dwelling, Alexandra Road is in essence 'normal.' But if we consider these practices as more than trajectories then there is one unavoidable element that distinguishes the territory of Alexandra Road from its surroundings - it is a pedestrian precinct. If you drive into the estate you emerge from underneath the street: and even if the street binds the estate together it is still opposed to the 'underworld' of the car park (fig. 36). If everything above is striving towards normality, the underground car park is its 'other.' It is a repressed facet on which the success of the world above ground rests. This condition also highlights the fact that the street (Rowley Way) is an artificial ground (fig. 37). Even when walking in from the surrounding streets this fact is difficult to avoid. Rowley way ends abruptly at a chasm that exposes the lower level as well as the supports of the northern blocks and which make them (the supports), all of a sudden, appear fragile. The street is not a through route; it is an access street for the dwellings. Rowley Way is ultimately a reflection of a street and the strongest reminder that one is on a territory that is disconnected from the city.



Fig. 36: Underground parking under Rowley Way



Fig. 37: Rowley Way

VII. Comparison and summaries

Like the Brunswick Centre, Alexandra Road is also a listed building and has a mixture of council tenants and flat owners. However, the intention was not to compare these projects directly, but to uncover some of the ways in which they operate in terms of 'other' spaces and everyday practices. Each project has a specific history, a relation to their site, and a way of living in them that makes them more different than alike. To attempt to find the same kinds of practices or to identify a similarity in their 'otherness' is to ignore these important differences.

The Brunswick Centre consists of a series of conditions that negate, overlap and reverse each other. It is distinctly other in some ways and part of the everyday in others. There are parallel routines and lives that intersect in places (lobbies, lifts, galleries) and that are separate in others (concourse and street). It can be seen as a site of multiple heterotopias, some deviant (homeless residents underground)⁴³ and others transitional (migrants who are passing through)⁴⁴.

Alexandra Road suggests the idea of weak heterotopias - a condition that replicates many traditional and expected forms and relationships, but whose otherness is subtle, almost hidden, but lurking just (and in this case, literally) beneath the surface.

I have tried to avoid seeing these projects as 'other' by virtue of their appearance. Rather, their appearance is sometimes seen negatively ('concrete jungle') and other times positively ("The earthy red brick walk way and the dazzling white concrete structures had such a jolly Mediterranean feel"⁴⁵). Reactions to the appearance of estates can also change over time. Reactions to Maiden Lane, another Camden estate of over 500 dwellings, went from 'palace, paradise, fantastic'⁴⁶ to 'disgusting' and 'a prison camp'⁴⁷ in the span of six years. The appearance of any council estate needs to be seen in the context of social and cultural conditions that determine its relation to the possible formation of heterotopias. The relationship of appearances (visual content) to heterotopia should only be seen in perceptual terms - that is, if they are part of

⁴³ Melhuish, "Towards a Phenomenology of the Concrete Megastructure," p. 24.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 26.

⁴⁵ Su Cross, resident at Alexandra Road.

⁴⁶ Bill Hillier, *Space Is The Machine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 206.

⁴⁷ From a report by Hunt Thompson Architects quoted in "Maiden Amendments" *The Architectural Review*, November, no. 1101 (1988) pp. 75-76. Hillier notes that most of the negative comments collected by Hunt Thompson related to maintenance issues and that sixty-nine per cent approved of the appearance of the estate.

the set of relationships that contribute to heterotopias, it is most likely a perceptual heterotopia. To make this distinction clear, the heterotopia of the abstract and unused grounds that surround many estates is to a good degree formed by political means – the signs that say ‘no ball games.’ It is also heavily formed by its spatial conditions and relationship to the surrounding dwellings. The fences, gates and security measures that are being introduced to old estates are a combination of political and physical conditions.

I have often argued the idea that forms and spaces are of vital importance – the idea that configurations of space are a primary source of spatial practices. This is close to the theoretical position of Bill Hillier and Space Syntax:

“Whatever the long-term effects of architecture are, it will be proposed that they pass through this central fact, that architecture, through the design of space, creates a virtual community with a certain structure and a certain density. This is what architecture does and can be seen to do, and it may be all that architecture does.”⁴⁸

There is a certain logic to this, but only up to a point. The analytical method of Space Syntax is sensitive to many of the issues outlined above, but would not, for example, recognise phenomena such as the idea of an artificial ground. The reason is that what Space Syntax recognises are two-dimensional spatial patterns and not three-dimensional spatial configurations. This is evident in his critique of Christopher Alexander’s concept of patterns.

“For our purposes, Alexander’s notion of a pattern is too bound to the contingent properties of configurations to be useful for us; while at a more abstract level, his preoccupation with hierarchical forms of spatial arrangement would hinder the formation of non-hierarchical, abstract notions of spatial relations which, in our view, are essential to giving a proper account of spatial organisation.”⁴⁹

It is precisely Alexander’s concern for hierarchy that keeps his work three-dimensional. Each element in Alexander’s pattern language is a bundle of spatial-practical relations: for example, ‘window seat,’ cannot be understood in isolation from the window, its location or the practice of sitting and viewing out from within. This approach connects, whereas the search for a ‘non-hierarchical, abstract notion of spatial relations’ disconnects.

Both concepts, heterotopias and the everyday, keep one attentive to things that connect. Heterotopias do not exist in isolation, but require spaces around it to mirror, suspect or suspend. Heterotopias must make connections in order to reproduce them in another fashion, and in this sense it they could be said to be parasitical. The concourse of the Brunswick Centre is both

⁴⁸ Bill Hillier, *Space Is The Machine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 188.

⁴⁹ Bill Hillier, *The Social Logic of Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. xi.

connected and disconnected to its surroundings and it both belongs to and, in a way, rejects its housing component. The everyday is also connective:

“The concept of everydayness does not therefore designate a system, but rather a denominator common to existing systems...”⁵⁰

For Lefebvre, the everyday is a connection among systems that appear separate and distinct. Isn't this, in fact, one of the fundamental qualities of cities, the juxtaposing of differences woven together by their practitioners? This is perhaps one aspect missing in de Certeau's analysis of the walker. The walker, while selecting spatial elements and composing a personal story is not just bringing together these spaces, but also combining their activities, regions, gazes, and a range of social relations. The under- and over-world of Alexandra Road are combined in the practice of individuals. Brown was not antagonistic towards the automobile, and was uncertain about separating vehicles and pedestrians. To compensate he attempted to bring light and space into the car parks so that there would be space for activities like washing or repairing one's car.⁵¹ In actual fact, it has not turned out this way and the link is a reluctant one between a dangerous 'underworld' and idyllic 'overground.'

Heterotopias and the everyday are useful for exploring the ways in which forms and practices are connected to interpretation, power structures and social practices, but there remains the question of how heterotopias and the everyday relate to each other. We can see that they can exist in and through each other avoiding the construction of another binary opposition, but this needs more exploration. There is also more work to be done with the notion of heterotopias - instead of Foucault's original list of heterotopias as programmes and sites, could we not find other ways of categorising them, for example, perceptual heterotopias, political heterotopias ('no ball games'), and weak heterotopias.

Luis Diaz

University of Brighton

⁵⁰ Henri Lefebvre, "Everyday and Everydayness," p. 35.

⁵¹ "What is not traditional is the separation and consequent distance from the dwelling to the car. [...] It can only be mitigated by providing a good environment for vehicles with natural light and ventilation, and by allowing space for car washing and maintenance; the leisure activities of a motorized age." Neave Brown "Neave Brown, Alexandra Road," p. 8.