



Robin Hood Gardens,  
London, UK, 1970. Photo  
by Peter Smithson.

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## Robin Hood Gardens, Extensions and Limits

The limits of architecture are thematic in the form of Alison and Peter Smithsons' Robin Hood Gardens, which was designed in several iterations beginning in 1963 and was completed in 1972. By limits, I mean three distinct but related conditions: the formal limits that a work of architecture establishes between inside and outside; the disciplinary limits between architecture, urbanism and landscape; and the broadly cultural limits that constrain the possibilities of architectural thought and production at a given moment in time. The project consists in part of a series of concrete means of separating the interior of the site from its surroundings; elements of building, infrastructure and landscape are formally integrated towards the definition of this urban precinct; the physical and cultural context in which the project was designed and built constrains its form. While the limits described above can be understood as fundamental to any work of architecture, what distinguishes Robin Hood Gardens when examined in these terms is the extent to which the project continues to offer insights into the conditions—both within the discipline and without—in which contemporary architecture is produced.<sup>1</sup>

Robin Hood Gardens is today the subject of renewed attention in Britain due to its impending demolition, however the project has not, in the decades since its completion, been substantively reconsidered on formal grounds or with respect to subsequent developments in the discipline. The largest of the Smithsons' relatively few built works and the only significant urban housing project that they realized, Robin Hood Gardens has typically been evaluated in relation to models of urbanism previously elaborated by the Smithsons, models which are themselves

often taken to be derivative of Le Corbusier's urban proposals of the 1920s. But the project, a discrete work of architecture rather than urbanism, diverges from its antecedents within the Smithsons' body of work and the architectural history in which the Smithsons were immersed, producing qualities and possibilities for critical interpretation specific to its form and the context in which it was produced.

Previous critiques of Robin Hood Gardens have generally been made along two related lines, both characteristic of the architectural debates of the period.<sup>2</sup> The first is that the project does not advance an idea of urbanism commensurate with the Smithsons' previously stated ambitions to produce a new model of the city suited to an emerging postwar society. These ambitions were first articulated in their entry in the 1952 Golden Lane housing competition—which called for an incrementally developing network of branching slab buildings linked by elevated pedestrian decks—and then elaborated in the Smithsons' presentation of their "Urban Re-Identification" grille at CIAM IX in 1953 (leading to their role in the subsequent dissolution of CIAM and founding of Team X), as well as in the contemporaneous "Urban Re-Identification" manifesto. The latter was not published in full until 1970, however, where it was positioned as a direct theoretical predecessor of Robin Hood Gardens in the Smithson's book *Ordinariness and Light*, unambiguously subtitled *Urban Theories 1952-60 and their Application in a Building Project 1963-70*. In part for this reason, Golden Lane has often been taken as the model from which Robin Hood Gardens is derived and the standard by which it is to be evaluated, despite clear distinctions in the form and scope of the latter project.

1. This article is developed from research conducted while the 2013-14 Yale Bass Scholar in Architecture at the University of Cambridge. It rests in part on materials held at the Alison and Peter Smithson Archive at the Frances Loeb Library at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

2. Most comprehensively argued by Peter Eisenman in his formal

analysis of the project upon its completion. Eisenman, "From Golden Lane to Robin Hood Gardens. Or If You Follow the Yellow Brick Road, It May Not Lead to Golders Green," *Oppositions* 1 (1973): 27-56. Republished in *Alison & Peter Smithson: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Max Risselada (Barcelona: Poligrafia, 2011), 207-227.

The second argument is that, as designed and built, Robin Hood Gardens fails to present an image and form of public housing commensurate with the aspirations of its inhabitants. This position was elaborated by Charles Jencks in his celebration of the death of modernist architecture in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, where his critique of Robin Hood Gardens followed the famous introductory passage dating modernism's end to the moment the first of Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe slabs were imploded.<sup>3</sup> The perceived failure of the Smithsons to translate their stated interest in historic urban precincts such as Grey's Inn in London and the Royal Crescent at Bath into a model of lasting function and appeal is taken as representative of the disconnect between the words and deeds of modernist architecture that was central to the postmodernist critiques of Jencks and others.<sup>4</sup> By the standards of these arguments, Robin Hood Gardens has generally been understood as a compromised anachronism, neither radical nor ameliorative enough, a late instantiation of an exhausted modernism that had been proven incapable of living up to its promises of producing a new and better world.

The Smithsons were aware of and discussed these arguments in interviews, even before the project was complete or had been publicly criticized by their peers.<sup>5</sup> Though they were clear in their ambition to coherently define a singular urban space through the form of the project, rather than to instantiate a new urban system, they also questioned whether they should have proposed a purer diagram of urbanism or whether, in fact, any attempt to address broader urban and social questions through architecture was futile. In so doing, they acknowledged the extent to which their positioning of Robin Hood

Gardens in relation to their earlier proposals for urban housing contributed to the negative reception of the project.<sup>6</sup>

More importantly, the ambivalence towards architecture and its role in the city that the Smithsons expressed in their discussions of Robin Hood Gardens reveals the extent to which the project was a product of the shifting disciplinary and cultural terrain in which architects were operating in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the assumption that architecture should address urban and social reform that had underpinned so much architectural production since the Victorian era, if not before, was increasingly questioned.



**Top.** Pruitt-Igoe, St. Louis, MO, 1972. **Above.** Robin Hood Gardens, 1972. Photo by Sandra Lousada.

This was not merely a shift in critical discourse or the popular reception of architecture, but one related to the waning power of the state as a patron of architecture and force for transformative urban change, in this case the postwar

3. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).  
4. See, for instance: Colin Rowe, "Introduction," in *Five Architects*, ed. Arthur Drexler (New York: Wittenborn, 1972); Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Mass.: London: MIT, 1978).  
5. Alison and Peter Smithson, "Broadcast 10 July, 1970, BBC2," republished in *Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions*, ed. Alan Powers

(London: Twentieth Century Society, 2010); "Interview with A+P Smithson," *Architektur Fragmenten* (1982), E070, The Alison and Peter Smithson Archive, Special Collections, Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.  
6. It should be noted that the project, though it would later suffer from the failures of management, maintenance and security that plagued so many postwar social housing projects, was well received by residents in its first years of occupation.

British welfare state that had been so central to the Smithsons' early imagination of the possibilities for their architecture.<sup>7</sup> If the extant city was increasingly a formal model for architecture in this period, there was an inversely proportional decrease in architects' ambitions and opportunities to effect the wholesale transformation of that city and its society.

This shifting disciplinary and cultural context contributes to the melancholy air that surrounds the project. It also, however, allows us to understand Robin Hood Gardens not as a late instantiation of discredited architectural ideals but as an early manifestation of contemporary concerns; that is, as an anachronism, but one that points towards the future rather than the past, anticipating architecture's relationship to the city in the present. In this respect, it is a fitting coincidence that Robin Hood Gardens was completed in the same year that the first buildings of Pruitt-Igoe were demolished. Where once the juxtaposition of the two projects might have suggested a failure on the Smithsons' parts to change with the times, stubbornly insisting that a compromised fragment of a decades old theory could be a socially progressive project, today it suggests a more potent sense of temporal disjunction, the image of a richer architecture rising from the rubble of its predecessors, richer precisely because of the formal complexity born out of the Smithsons' engagement with the changing constraints of the period.

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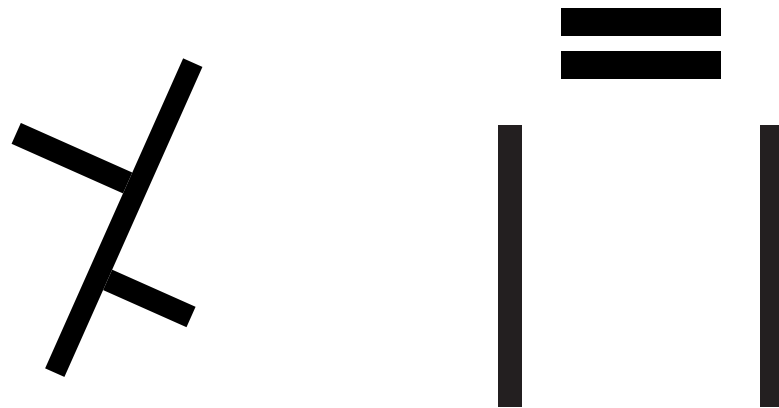
The divergence of Robin Hood Gardens from those models of architecture and urbanism that the Smithsons had previously articulated—particularly the branching slab buildings of Golden Lane and the symmetrically arrayed buildings framing a central green in the Mehringplatz project (1962)—can be traced through their working drawings, which reveal the evolution of the project from the first stage of the design (referred to as Manisty Street) to its built form. These drawings show the extent to which the Smithsons initially considered and then departed from the

7. For more on the political context in which the Smithsons (and their contemporaries) worked, see: Nicholas Bullock, "Building the Socialist Dream or Housing the Socialist State? Design versus the Production of Housing in the 1960s," in

Golden Lane model of linked slab buildings as the project evolved, opting to pursue a strategy in which the formal definition and coherence of the edges and interior of the site superseded their earlier interest in establishing the seeds of a new and potentially extensive architectural-infrastructure network. The Smithsons enact strict limits around and within the site, establishing layered formal boundaries that separate the interior of the site from its surroundings. The project has literal walls and moats and its buildings are expressed as a protective perimeter enclosing the public, pedestrian landscape at its center. While the buildings have wide, open-air access decks, the potential of these to link to other buildings as "streets" is suppressed through the articulation of the ends of the slabs—typologically, the stand-alone slab buildings of the project should be considered closer to the closed circulation of the Unité d'Habitation, for instance, than the networked *immeubles villas* of the Ville Contemporaine, to which they have previously been compared. The formal boundaries, the contained pedestrian realm and the provision of private parking garages for tenants in the project suggest the extent to which the Smithsons' questioned not only the notion of a new pedestrian infrastructure, but the necessity of relating to a traditional pedestrian neighborhood, while the deformation of the slab buildings, their articulation and the scale of the project reveal the Smithsons' engagement with the forms of the surrounding infrastructure and building fabric, from major roads to monumental industrial sites to vernacular row housing.

In all aspects of the design, Robin Hood Gardens becomes more specific to its site and more singular and discrete as an architectural proposal as the Smithsons developed it throughout the intermittent, years-long design process. With Robin Hood Gardens, the Smithsons establish a coherent and complex language for the definition of a site within the city that is at once contextually responsive and autonomous, representing an attempt to critically engage with present and future patterns of urban development rather than proposing to overturn them. They do so by integrating aspects of urbanism, architecture and landscape into the project at a scale realizable by

*Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern: Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond*, eds. Mark Crinson and Claire Zimmerman (New Haven: Yale, 2010); Bullock, *Building the Post-War World: Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2002).



Golden Lane (1952), Mehringplatz (1965) (Scale Approximate).

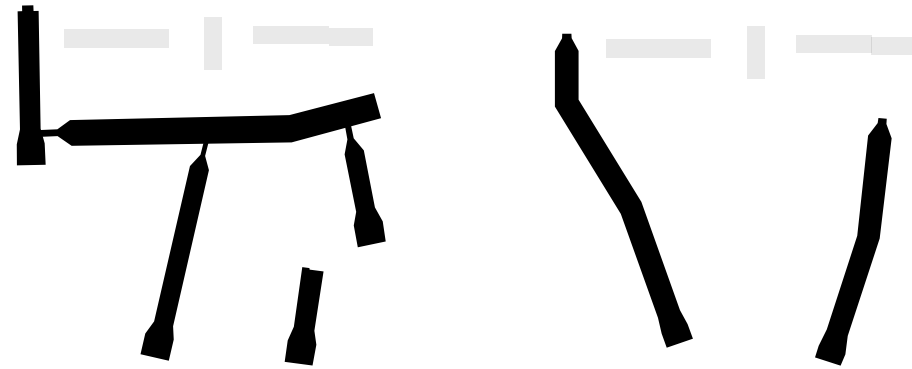
the sole designer, therefore revealing techniques and strategies for the inevitable negotiations between part (architecture) and whole (city) that a work of urban architecture must enter into.

The slabs of Robin Hood Gardens are segmented and bent to conform to the geometry of the major streets that define the perimeter of the site, rather than following the idealized cardinal orientation of CIAM housing or the branching networks of the Golden Lane model. They depart as well from the geometry of contemporaneous projects such as Candilis, Josic and Woods' plan for Toulouse le Mirail (itself related to the branching "stem" buildings of Golden Lane) that are segmented and bent systematically in service of the production of an *ex novo* pattern of urban development, rather than idiosyncratically in relation to an extant urban context. While the slabs of Robin Hood Gardens deform to the physical context of the surrounding area, extant internal streets within the site boundary are removed to maximize the continuity of the linear buildings and their access decks, allowing for a distinct scale of linear building and cohesive public space to be established on the site. The slabs also appear to bend around the constructed landforms at the center of the project, destabilizing any presumption of an ideal or natural state on which the project is dependent—whether prior urban forms, a new urban plan or seemingly persistent topographical features (of the kind that condition Le Corbusier's projects for Algiers and Rio de Janeiro, for instance), all of which appear to be both registered and challenged in the form of the project.

The articulation of the facades and internal circulation of the slabs of Robin Hood Gardens

similarly suggests both continuity with and departure from traditional, as well as modernist, models of housing. The buildings express the kind variation within repetitive structures and street/garden sidedness of the terraced block and the court and crescent that define the scale and organization of housing in traditional models of British urbanism, while departing from the modest height and muted gentility of those references. The effects of the mass and surface of Robin Hood Gardens are no less austere than those produced by Georgian architect-planners and Victorian developers, vertically striated concrete facades taking the place of relentless vistas of brick. The model of the row house, with its particularly British weighting of the relationship between the individual and the collective, is on the one hand recalled and the other challenged, the project suggesting two or three stacked layers of traditional two and three-story tall rows of worker's housing. The deep horizontal cuts on the street-side of the slabs and the multi-story voids punched through them at their inflection points likewise produce distinct scales of formal articulation when compared to contemporaneous slab housing projects.

These oscillations between contextual and autonomous formal gestures carry through to the details of the project. Like the vertical subdivisions of a traditional street-wall, the variegated concrete skin of the building façades precisely indexes the internal arrangement of the individual housing units and access decks, while also serving the environmental needs of the program, which required noise baffling exterior fins due to the traffic noise from the major thoroughfares surrounding the site. At the same time, these fins



Manisty Street (1963), Robin Hood Gardens (1968) (Scale Approximate).

make knowing reference to the vertical I-beams of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's building facades, here rendered in pre-cast concrete, after having appeared in painted steel in the Hunstanton School (1949-54) and in stone cladding in the Economist Buildings (1959-64). The articulation of the facade speaks to the Smithsons' disciplinary influences and their desires to extend, in their own particular fashion, an architectural language initiated by Mies van der Rohe's postwar work, while challenging the universal deployment of that language across building types and sites, autonomous from their specific requirements and contexts.

The most distinctive formal quality in Robin Hood Gardens is the way in which landscape is made an integral element of the project. Rather than being residual to the architecture—the ground against which the building figures are set or the void defined by them—landscape is made a spatially "positive" element within the composition of the site. This is achieved through the landform, which is an integral but overlooked aspect of the Smithsons' urban and architectural theory and practice from Golden Lane onwards.<sup>8</sup> In the Smithsons' work, the landform is a spatial and material transformation of the history of the site. In the case of Robin Hood Gardens, the landforms are literally composed of the material of the buildings demolished to make way for the project, a strategy elaborated not only by the Smithsons in earlier texts, but in related contexts such as post-war Germany—where parks were created out of mounds of ruins removed from

bombed urban centers—and turn of century East London—where the terraced central garden of the Boundary Estate, the first public housing project in London, was formed of ruins from the slum buildings demolished to make way for it.

The landform also represents an entirely different scale or character of time than that of the recent history of the site, occupying an ontologically ambiguous position between natural and constructed and provoking the basic questions, "what is it made of?" or "where did it come from?" Any notion of the natural or given in the Smithsons' discourse and work is immediately undercut by the evident construction of that nature, whether the earthworks at the center of the project or the "landscape" of urban infrastructure and industrial monuments (among which they counted the Thames, its banks in East London the subject of intense manipulation over centuries) that they positioned the project in visual and formal relation to.

The form of the project thus extends architecture's representation of the varied temporalities of the city from the fleeting moments of spontaneous social engagement that were so crucial to the Smithsons' rhetoric on the city in their early work, as evident in their use of Nigel Henderson's photographs of children playing in the terraced streets of Bethnal Green on the "Urban Re-Identification" *grille* (which were then recalled by the photos they commissioned from Sandra Lousada of children playing on the mounds and decks of Robin Hood Gardens) to deeply embedded material and even

8. See, among others, discussions and representations of the landform in various projects of the mid-1950s, including "Urban Re-Identification," Bark Place Mews and Bates'

Burrows Lea Farm, as well as subsequent work of the 1970s such as Tees Pudding and Melbourne's Magic Mountains.



Robin Hood Gardens, 2013. Photo by author.

seemingly geological histories of a site that exceed any expression of specifically human construction or occupation. Through the synthesis of architectural and landscape forms, Robin Hood Gardens makes formally manifest representations of new, old and a kind of timelessness, oriented towards both the future and the past in a way that surpasses the limits of idealizing either as generative standards for architectural production.

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The strategies deployed in Robin Hood Gardens constitute an attempt to critically advance the formal language of modernist architecture through engagement with locally specific conditions and models of architecture, while not foregoing the ambition to imagine and represent alternatives to these given contexts. From the present, it is apparent that this form of inflected modernism has been a significant mode of operation for architects for much of the second-half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, carrying through various

theoretical, technological and aesthetic shifts of the period, and becoming particularly apparent in the wake of stylistic postmodernism.

In this respect, there are three identifiable formal traits that emerge in the project for Robin Hood Gardens: the deformation or inflection of a modernist typology such as the slab building by what might be called “site forces,” or the historical accumulation of infrastructure, building mass, views and other contextual cues that are translated into vectors or limits that shape the massing and orientation of the project; the articulation of the facade in a manner that is both indexical of internal organization or structural and environmental performance and embedded with disciplinary or cultural meaning that exceeds its basic construction and function; and the formal equivalency of building mass and ground, with the topographic expression of the landscape acting in relation to the deformation of the building mass to produce a formally integrated relationship between site and building.

The simultaneous deployment of these techniques of manipulating mass, facade and ground towards the synthetic formal resolu-



Robin Hood Gardens, 2013. Photo by author.

tion of architecture and site can be found in the work of a number of subsequent architects, extending to the present. One can imagine, for instance, the inflected slabs, articulated facades and constructed topography of Robin Hood Gardens as an evolutionary step between the formal (and theoretical) separation of vertical building and horizontal ground in Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation and the mutual entanglement of building and ground (achieved in part through the articulated surface of the facade) in varied works by Morphosis, including the San Francisco Federal Building and unbuilt projects such as the NYC 2012 Olympic Village and their proposal for the site of the World Trade Center. To these formal techniques, one could add the consistent interest among the three architects (across sixty-odd years) in the circulation devices of the skip-stop elevator (allowing for units that span the width of the slab) and the corridor represented as a street, expressing a desire not to replace the city, but to internalize aspects of its organization and function within a new scale of architectural project that is considered both analogous to and

autonomous from its physical and cultural context. While this comparison does not suggest any direct influence of Robin Hood Gardens on subsequent work—certainly not of the intensity of influence that the work of Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe exerted on the Smithsons—its reveals ways in which Robin Hood Gardens can be read in relation to contemporary questions of urban architectural form as much as in relation to projects by the Smithsons and others that preceded it.

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In its form, Robin Hood Gardens resembles parentheses, two linear buildings bending towards each other around the green mounds they contain, an exception within the unfolding text of the city that offers critical commentary on that city. At once the project prompts reflections on the discipline of architecture itself and the limits, imposed from within and without, that constrain those working within the discipline. It is instructive that, until recently, the



Robin Hood Gardens, 2013. Photo by author.

landforms of Robin Hood Gardens, perhaps its most distinctive and significant feature, have been unacknowledged in critical commentary on the project, presumably because they were understood to have fallen outside the disciplinary bounds of architecture and architectural criticism. And yet it is precisely through the formal integration of building and landscape in response to the urban context in which the project was developed that Robin Hood Gardens represents a contribution to the history of postwar architecture, which can be read not only in reference to subsequent work, but as a persistent model for the production of new architecture (even in the moment that it has been condemned). To paraphrase Peter Eisenman's summation of the Smithsons' architectural ethic,<sup>9</sup> Robin Hood Gardens is neither naive, cynical nor pragmatic in its engagement with the city. It exists in fertile territory somewhere between and beyond these positions—a territory that today it seems increasingly important to discover and operate from.

9. Eisenman, "From Golden Lane," 223.

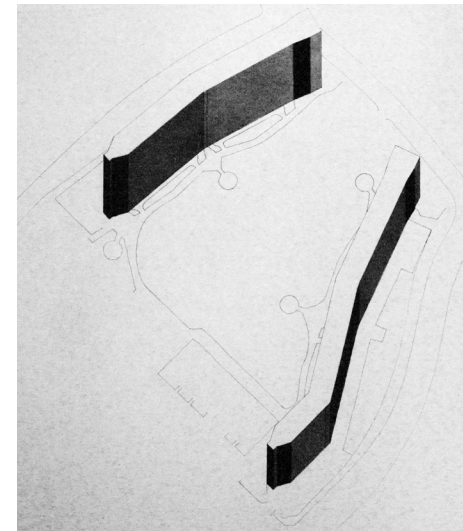
10. Smithsons, "The Fragmentary Utopia," E040, The Alison and

The Smithsons discussed their urban projects as "fragments of utopia," individual pieces that represented the possibility of a new whole, and referred to Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building and Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation as models of this approach.<sup>10</sup> However, they acknowledged that the individual part that is architecture could no longer initiate the development of a new whole, a position that can be understood to mark a shift that occurred in the postwar period towards a contemporary understanding of the limits of the possibilities of architecture with respect to the extant city. Robin Hood Gardens can therefore be read in light of Mies van der Rohe's statement, made after his move to the sprawling automotive metropolises of the American Midwest, that the city has become a vast jungle, within which all one can do is attempt to make a clearing—that there is no longer any point in architecture aspiring to urban planning, but that architects should strive towards the formal delineation of urban buildings set against the untameable expanses of the contemporary urban environment.<sup>11</sup> Like Mies van

Peter Smithson Archive, Special Collections, Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

der Rohe's postwar work, Robin Hood Gardens is a model for operating within the limits imposed on architecture by the broader cultural forces embodied in the contemporary city, at the same time that it does not merely reproduce the models established by those forces.

Robin Hood Gardens was conceived and built in the context of a city—and particularly in the context of the East London Docklands—in the midst of the radical social and physical transformations of de-industrialization, the winding down of welfare state social and urban development programs, the emergence of new models of public-private development, increasing automobile ownership, changing consumer behaviour, new patterns of immigration and other shifts that have come to characterize the postwar period. The Smithsons were conscious of this context and the challenges it posed to architecture, if ambiguous in their articulations of how to address it. Robin Hood Gardens does not represent a proposition for a revolutionized city or society, rather its form registers this changing context, representing an acknowledgement that these revolutions were already under way due to forces beyond the grasp of architects, displacing the transformative ambitions of earlier generations. As Robin Hood Gardens takes the form of an enclave—or a space of difference set apart within the city by its clear formal boundaries—it could be read in anticipation of subsequent arguments for an archi-



Robin Hood Gardens, c. 1968. Axonometric Drawing.

itecture that resists the homogenizing development of the late capitalist city (either through cultural specificity or formal abstraction, both of which could be read in the project), though its history as a built work reveals the limits of such positions.<sup>12</sup> A close reading of Robin Hood Gardens, however, suggests further possibilities for analysis of its political valences in relation to the condemnations of social housing in which it has been implicated, as well as the municipal policies and urban development practices that contributed to its perceived failure as social housing, and that have led to plans for its demolition and replacement.<sup>13</sup>

To evaluate an individual architect or work of architecture on their ability to put forward a plan for the city or for their ability to overcome the social, economic and political forces that dictate the functioning of social housing (or any program) is to miss the opportunity to read works of architecture not as proposals for the improvement of society, futile or otherwise, but as representations of the position of and possibilities that exist for architecture within the broader culture at a given moment. While this reveals the limits of architecture as a means of effecting measurable social change, it also reveals the lasting potential of architectural form to act as a means of representing difference and of suggesting alternative possibilities for the occupation of the urban environment that might emerge within the contemporary city.

11. "There are no cities, in fact, any more...it goes on like a forest...that is the reason why we cannot have the old cities any more...that is gone forever...planned city and so on...We should think about the means...that we have to live in a jungle...and maybe we do well by that." Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, quoted in Phyllis Lambert, "Seagram: Union of Building and Landscape," *Design Observer*, 8 April 2013, accessed 23 July 2014, <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/seagram-union-of-building-and-landscape/37758/>.

12. An argument for the former can be found in Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," *Perspecta*

20 (1983). The latter has been recently articulated by Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: 2011). It should be noted that the enclave can also be understood as the model *par excellence* of late capitalist urban development, as argued, for instance, by Frederic Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke, 1997) and elsewhere.

13. Of the kind made, for instance, by Katherine G. Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth," *Journal of Architectural Education* 44:3 (1991), 449-97, or Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2010).