



A GUIDE TO THE NEW RUINS
OF GREAT BRITAIN







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OWEN HATHERLEY



VERSO

London New York



*Trumpets around the walls of the Barbican. Trumpets
turning into penny whistles and then, reflected in the new
shining glass, suddenly and surprisingly accompanied by
a respectful and celebratory choir.*
—Raymond Williams

First published by Verso 2010
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-84467-651-4

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset by MJ Gavan, Truro, Cornwall
Printed by Scandbook AB in Sweden



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Introduction

The Change We See

In 2009, the dying Labour government came up with one of the more amusing of its political gambits. As urban regeneration and the new public buildings of the Private Finance Initiative were so prominent and so popular, how about a campaign focusing on them, presenting the buildings that resulted as proof positive that New Labour hadn't broken its promises, that it was the party of change, that it was rebuilding Britain, and that social programmes were at its heart? The campaign was christened 'The Change We See'. Go to the website and you find the explanation. 'Since 1997, we've changed this country—rebuilding the lives of children, older people and families. Make no mistake, this could not have happened without supporters like you. Now we face an opposition who wants to deny our successes and cut the public services we rescued. We must stand together and show how proud we are of these historic achievements.' So, it asks the public to submit photographs of PFI Hospitals, City Academies, Sure Start centres and the like to a Flickr group.

Sadly, it met with an immediate torrent of ridicule and subversion on a wide spectrum from political opponents to the editor of the *Architects' Journal*. The Change We See entailed barn-like buildings resembling those built in the eighties and nineties for the supermarket Asda, housing Sure Start children's centres; a surgery that resembled the cheap woolly designs used by the developer Barratt Homes; a Law Courts (sorry, 'Justice Centre') constructed



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in lumpily jolly 1986 postmodernist style that was, astonishingly, completed in 2005; a primary school that resembles ‘Britain’s Guantanamo’, Belmarsh Prison; and much that is less immediately appalling, but all produced in the chillingly blank Private Finance Initiative (PFI) idiom of clean lines, bright colours, red bricks and wipe-clean surfaces, as if furnishing a children’s ward. Soon, the Flickr group was being subverted by new ‘luxury’ tower blocks that looked like Soviet barracks; CCTV cameras; lamp-posts capped with spikes to deter vandals; stop and search cards; and images of poisoned brownfield land soon to be developed into housing ... all contributed by mischievous Flickr users with the tag ‘Vote Labour’. This wasn’t simply some architectural criticism of a real political advance that aesthetes and snobs just didn’t appreciate. The functions are as awful as the forms: the omnipresent PFI schemes, or the bizarre notion that gentrification, as represented by the penthouses of Manchester’s Beetham Tower, ‘rebuilt the lives of children, older people and families’, other than the children, elderly and families of the decidedly affluent, of course.

My own little contribution to *The Change We See*—which the administrators cheerfully added to the group when I put it forward—was Darent Valley Hospital in Dartford, on the edges



Darent Valley, Dartford, the first PFI hospital



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of London, where I have had the privilege of being treated for a long-term condition over several years. It was the first major NHS hospital built as part of the Private Finance Initiative, with the entire complex built and owned by the construction company Carillion, who claim to offer ‘end-to-end solutions’ for public-private partnerships. Like all PFI hospitals it is very far from the town centre. For reasons probably connected to land values, PFI hospitals are always on the outer reaches, in the ‘no there, there’ places, quarantined away.

A landmark in the strange new landscape created by the loosening of planning controls in the ‘Thames Gateway’, Darent Valley Hospital is just adjacent to Bluewater, the ultimate out-of-town, out-of-this-world mall, which is bunkered down inside a chalk pit and impossible to reach on foot. So the bus takes you past the M25, through what is probably legally the green belt—that is, a landscape of 1930s speculative housing and minuscule farms where forlorn horses look upon power stations and business parks—before eventually dropping you off at the top of a hill, from which you can survey an extraordinary non-place. The Queen Elizabeth II Bridge, its ungainly, steep curve reaching to the hangars and containers of Thurrock, and an endless strip of sheds and cranes stretching out as far as the North Sea.

The hospital itself, designed by Paulley Architects in 1999, is done in the public-private style which is by now familiar from a thousand New Labour non-projects. No doubt constructed with a concrete or steel frame, it attempts to avoid looking ‘institutional’ via a series of plasticky wavy roofs (which, as a bonus, have also become the hospital’s logo), tiny windows, some green glass, and a lot of yellow London stock brick. Inside the series of corridors and wards, into which natural light never seems to penetrate, there are dashes of jolly colour in the carpets and a peculiarly abstract colour-coding system. But the real design feature is the central atrium at the main Outpatients entrance, where a giant Carillion logo looks over a big branch of Upper Crust, a WH Smith, and a shop which sells a huge range of cuddly toys, amongst other concessions. The first time I went here I was quite





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alarmed by the rather early twentieth-century equipment in this ‘twenty-first-century hospital’, but one can purchase a wide variety of pastries here. In the Outpatients waiting room, large screens show—always grainy—footage of local appeals and health recommendations.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m usually well treated here, bearing in mind the hours of waiting around, and I do what I’m told, placing all reasonable and unreasonable trust in the physicians, but sometimes the new landscape and the vagaries of hospital treatment can intersect in undignified ways. Behind the site is a new residential development, most likely built as part of the same property deals that created the hospital; the NHS is nowadays encouraged to maximize profit from its land. An estate of little spec-builder cottages spans out around a patch of wasteland, and their back windows look out into the strip windows of the wards. Some of the homeowners may have caught more than a glimpse of me undergoing a brief but rather invasive procedure, as the blinds wouldn’t go all the way along the window. This was not, I presume, in the property brochure.

In the main Outpatients waiting room is a wall display on ‘Heritage’. Everything in Britain, especially in the Home Counties, must involve Heritage somewhere. Obviously there isn’t much to be found in a hospital which has only existed for ten years, but conveniently, it turns out that there was an Asylum for Imbeciles on the site in the nineteenth century. Sepia-toned pictures of this take up the space on the heritage wall. *This is England*, I always think when I’m here. I don’t mean in the sense that Iain Sinclair did when he visited Darent Valley in his 2002 travelogue *London Orbital* and imagined it an apocalyptic bedlam of lumpen proletarian troglodytes wielding bull terriers. I know it well, and it isn’t. It’s more because it represents a horrible, unplanned new landscape, the embodiment of New Labour’s attempt to transform the Welfare State into a giant business. It won’t *admit* to its newness, instead remaining petty and provincial, simulating a nebulous heritage. With its sober stock brick and metallic surfaces (by now blackened by the hospital incinerator) it doesn’t even have the





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pleasures of kitsch. Yet this dispiriting exurbia was not the whole story of Blairite Britain. The last fifteen years have also seen the attempted fulfilment—sometimes sincere, mostly cynical—of policies that purported to put urbanity and design at the centre of new building. In so doing, New Labour has fulfilled the wishes of some left-wing urbanists in a most unexpected fashion.

Be Careful What You Wish For

Perry Anderson recently wrote that Britain's history since Thatcher has been 'of little moment'.¹ Admirable as this statement is in pricking local pomposities and arguable though it may be in political terms, in architecture, as in art and music, the UK has retained a prominence that is out of all proportion to its geopolitical weight. British architectural schools (both in the stylistic sense and as educational institutions like the Architectural Association) have retained a massive importance. The High-Tech school of mechanistic style founded by former partners Norman Foster and Richard Rogers was successful in Paris and Hong Kong before London and Manchester, bringing prestige that was appropriately rewarded in the less than futuristic, if geographically



London's Financial District, as remade by Foster and Rogers





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indeterminate titles the two men now carry, Baron Foster of Thames Bank and Baron Rogers of Riverside. The immediately succeeding generation of Will Alsop or David Chipperfield would have a similar fate, with successes in Berlin or Marseilles before the UK rewarded their firms with commissions; after them, students—seldom British—of the Architectural Association in London like Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas and Steven Holl would achieve international prominence and domestic obscurity for their Deconstructivist warping of architecture into something barely functional but instantly ‘iconic’; most recently, new ornamentalists like Fashion Architecture Taste (FAT) or Foreign Office Architects found employment in the Netherlands or Japan first and foremost.

This pattern isn’t just at the level of architects-qua-architects, the famous Ayn Randian form-givers. The faceless megafirms for which British culture’s unambiguous corporate fealty seems particularly rich soil, such as RMJM (who recently hired disgraced banker Sir Fred Goodwin as an ‘adviser’), Building Design Partnership, Archial or Aedas, are especially prominent in the hyperactive building booms of China or the United Arab Emirates, producing watered-down versions of High-Tech and/or Deconstructivism for foreign export. Meanwhile, the brief televisual popularity of the Stirling Prize, the architectural Booker or BAFTA, showed both that there was an untapped public interest in architecture, and that British architects were as often to be found working abroad as in the UK, with the prize-winning entries in Germany or Spain more often than Wales or Northern Ireland. Why is it, then, that actual British architecture, *The Change We Can See*, is so very bad?

The answers to this question are usually tied up with New Labour’s particularly baroque procurement methods and an ingrained preference for the cheap and unpretentious, causing a whole accidental school of PFI architecture to emerge—often constructed via ‘design and build’ contracts which removed any control over the result from the architects, with niceties like detailing and fidelity to any original idea usually abandoned. The



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‘New Home, New Life, New You’—CABEism in Holloway Road, London

forms this took were partly dictated by cost, but also by amateurish parodies of exactly the kinds of high-art architecture mentioned above, creating something which Rory Olcayto of the *Architects’ Journal* suggests calling ‘CABEism’,² after the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, the design quango whose desperate attempts to salvage some possibility of aesthetic pleasure from PFI architects and their developers led to a set of stock recommendations. Their results can be seen everywhere—the aforementioned wavy roofs give variety, mixed materials help avoid drabness, the windswept ‘public realm’ is a concession to civic valour—but here I will call it Pseudomodernism, a style I regard as being every bit as appropriate to Blairism as Postmodernism was to Thatcherism and well-meaning technocratic Modernism to the postwar compromise.

The most impressive neoliberal sleight of hand, one pioneered in Britain before being eagerly picked up everywhere else, has been the creation of what Jonathan Meades neatly calls ‘social Thatcherism’. It has existed ever since the mid 1990s, and was not begun by the Labour Party. From John Major’s avowed intent to create a ‘classless society’ to New Labour’s dedication to fighting ‘social exclusion’, the dominant rhetoric has been neoliberalism


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with a human face. The liberal misinterpretation of this has long been that it proves the existence of some kind of ‘progressive consensus’, a continuation of social democracy, albeit in a more realistic, less ‘utopian’ manner. In the built environment, the thesis of a social democratic continuum that connects, say, the Labour of Clement Attlee to New Labour has appeared to be supported by the resurgence of Modernist architecture after an eclectic post-modernist interregnum, and an apparent focus on the city rather than the suburbs. Lord Richard Rogers has proclaimed this to be the ‘Urban Renaissance’ in a series of books and white papers with titles that now sound deeply melancholic, not only because of the dyslexic architect’s verbal infelicities: *A New London; Architecture—A Modern View, Cities for a Small Planet; Cities for a Small Country; Towards an Urban Renaissance; Towards a Strong Urban Renaissance ...*



This was enforced by bodies such as the Architecture and Urbanism department of the Greater London Authority locally, and the Urban Task Force and CUBE nationally, with mixed success. It enshrined in policy things which leftist architects like Rogers had been demanding throughout the Thatcher years—building was to be dense, in flats if need be, on ‘brownfield’ i.e. ex-industrial land, to be ‘mixed tenure’, and to be informed by ‘good design’, whatever exactly that might be. The result—five or six-storey blocks of flats, with let or unlet retail units at ground floor level, the concrete frames clad in wood, aluminium and render—can be seen in every urban centre. Similarly, new public spaces and technologies were intended to create the possibility of a new public modernism. One of the most curious, and retrospectively deeply poignant expressions of this early New Labour urbanism dates from the point where it might have seemed a modernizing, Europeanizing movement rather than today’s horrifying combination of Old Labourist chauvinist authoritarianism in social and foreign policy and relentless, uncompromising neoliberalism. This is Patrick Keiller’s 1999 film *The Dilapidated Dwelling*, referred to by the director himself alternately as his ‘New Labour film’ or his ‘naughty film’, made for Channel 4 but unreleased on




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DVD and seldom screened. Like his earlier, better known *London* and *Robinson In Space* it takes the form of an oblique travelogue, only this time with interviews and an ostensible overarching subject—rather than the earlier films’ Problem of London or Problem of England, this is the Problem of Housing. Introducing it twelve years later, Keiller recalled that ‘I thought in 1997 that we were going to rebuild Britain, after all the damage that had been done to it, like we did after 1945.’ The film is a sharp pre-emptive analysis of why this would not happen.

Today, the message of the film is: be careful what you ask of capitalism, as it might just grant your wish. In short, *The Dilapidated Dwelling* asks the question: why does the production of housing never get modernized? (With the linked question, why is construction so backward?) It seems to derive from the search for ‘new space’ in the 1995 travelogue *Robinson in Space*, where the novel if unnerving spaces of containerization, big sheds, security, espionage and imprisonment almost entirely exclude housing, which is only seen in glimpses, usually of neo-Georgian executive estates. Housing, when this film was made in 1997–9, was not new space. It has become so since, however, especially in the cities.

There’s a desperately sad yearning in Keiller’s two ‘Robinson’ films for a true metropolitanism, a Baudelairean modernity worthy of the first country in history to urbanize itself. In *London*, the capital and its infrastructure are strangled by a ‘suburban government’; and in *Robinson in Space*, ports like Southampton or Liverpool are weird, depopulated, the enormous turnover of imports and exports never leading to any attendant cosmopolitanism or glamour, the internationalism confined to the automated space of the container port. So it’s interesting to consider these films after the Urban Task Force, after the palpable failure of the Urban Renaissance, the death of which was arguably heralded by the anti-congestion charge, anti-inner city ‘Zone 5 strategy’ that got Boris Johnson elected as Mayor of London.

The Urban Renaissance was the very definition of good ideas badly thought out and (mostly) appallingly applied. The expansion of public spaces and mixed uses led merely to pointless


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piazas with attendant branches of Costa Coffee; the rise in city living has led to brownfield sites and any space next to a waterway, from the Thames's most majestic expanses to the slurry of Deptford Creek, sprouting the aforementioned Urban Task Force blocks. Meanwhile, the film's central suggestion—that new housing should not only be on brownfield or greenfield, but should moreover replace the much-loved but standardized and deeply dilapidated housing of 1870–1940 that dominates the country—was partially fulfilled in a disturbing manner. This is where the film is at its most controversial.

Britain, it argues, has the oldest housing stock in Europe, and the most dilapidated, and it is enormously expensive to retrofit—why not just knock it down and build something better? Chillingly for conservationists, Keiller takes for his model the modular, inexpensive, prefabricated construction of supermarkets, although introducing the film in 2009 he ruefully wonders 'why I thought we should all live in Tesco'. Nonetheless, why be sentimental about substandard housing from the era that coined the term 'jerrybuilt'?

The idea of destroying and replacing huge swathes of Victorian housing found fruit in the government's Pathfinder scheme. Designed to 'revitalize' the economies of a selection of post-industrial areas from Birmingham northwards, it entailed the compulsory purchase and demolition of (most frequently council-owned) housing not so much to replace it with something better, but for the purposes of, in Pathfinder's subtitle, 'Housing Market Renewal' in northern towns previously untouched by the southeastern property boom. The results are inconclusive, to say the least, and reveal just how little the quality of a set of buildings has to do with its place in the property pecking order. As Heritage campaigners were keen to point out, the streets tinned-up ready for demolition under Pathfinder were just those which, in London, would have been long since the subject of fevered property speculation. In Liverpool especially, Pathfinder's demolition programmes encompassed some large bay-windowed nineteenth-century houses which would have gone for silly money further



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south—though they did not stop to ask exactly why their northern equivalents were less lucrative.³ The infill that replaced the Victorian streets, where it appeared, followed the Urban Task Force rules impeccably, albeit that the ‘good design’ element is somewhat questionable.

The architectural argument misses the truly original element in Pathfinder, what differentiates it from the superficially similar slum clearance programmes of the 1890s through the 1960s. It is a programme of class cleansing. The new housing is not let to those who had been cleared, as was the case with most earlier clearance, especially after 1945, but is allocated for the ‘aspirational’ in an only partially successful attempt to lure the middle classes back to the inner-cities they deserted for the suburbs. This is in no way limited to Pathfinder itself, but forms part of the managed neoliberalism which has pervaded New Labour’s approach to urban policy, as to so much else. Instruments brought in after 1945 in order to bypass the interests of slum landlords and landowners legally—Compulsory Purchase Orders, Development corporations—were now used to the opposite end.

In this New Labour were not pioneers. The first to use the instruments of social democracy against its social content was Westminster Council under Shirley Porter, in the 1980s. Concerned that the Council was at constant risk of falling to Labour, the local Conservative leadership found that council tenants, spread liberally across the area by earlier reformers, were more likely to vote Labour. The Council had the legal capabilities to get them out, rehousing them in inferior accommodation out of the borough and offering their—often very fine—flats for sale to upwardly mobile buyers. With an impressive prefiguring of New Labour nu-language, this programme was called Building Stable Communities. Of course, this was gerrymandering, and Porter herself is still essentially on the lam from justice because of it⁴—but New Labour would do something very similar, without even the rational excuse of ensuring electoral success. Under the banner of making communities more ‘mixed’, council estates such as the huge Heygate Estate in the Elephant and Castle or Holly Street in







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Hackney were sold off and demolished, their tenants transferred elsewhere or heaped onto the waiting list, all in the name of what Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott would call Building Sustainable Communities.

The main semi-governmental organ of ‘regeneration’, English Partnerships, was designed to bring business and state together, the latter often sponsoring the former to such an extent that it would have been cheaper just to build on its own. It formed part of a weird grey area of almost entirely state-funded private companies—the Arm’s Length Management Organizations to which much council housing was transferred, PFI and outsourcing specialists like Capita and QinetiQ, both of which were formed out of government departments. They embody the phase of neoliberalism described by the cultural critic Mark Fisher among others as ‘market Stalinism’, where state *dirigisme* continues and grows, working this time in the service of property and land.⁷ By 2009 English Partnerships had transmogrified into the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), whose immediate task was to respond to the 2008 property crash with a house-building programme. Early on, there was some hope that this would lead to a new wave of council building, particularly given that waiting lists had spiralled after the crash, but instead private enterprise continued to be subsidized by the state, in the form of the Kickstart stimulus programme. This offered £1 billion of direct state funding to private developers and builders for ‘high-quality mixed tenure housing developments’, which would be assessed for said quality by the aforementioned aesthetics quango CABA.

After its first schemes were unveiled at the start of 2010, Kickstart was heavily criticized by CABA for extremely low scores on all their measurements—in terms of energy-efficiency, design quality, public space, access to facilities and public transport and much else. Both bodies refused to state who had designed the schemes that had been assessed or where they were, despite a Freedom of Information request by *Building Design*—the HCA’s head Bob Kerslake claimed it would damage the house builders’



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‘commercial confidentiality’. At the very end of the New Labour project was a massive programme of public funding for substandard private housing. This was the change we couldn’t see, as we weren’t allowed to know where the schemes actually were—although some of those in this book are likely candidates.

Architecture Becomes Logo: The Rise of Pseudomodernism

In terms of policy, then, an attempt to reform the Thatcherite city has had extremely ambiguous results; but in terms of architecture, the postmodernist architecture that characterized the 1980s and 1990s is, in a superficial sense, very much on the defensive, and has been for most of the last decade. Although it persists as the dominant aesthetic for speculative house-building outside the large cities, it is by now almost wholly absent from the architectural magazines and the metropolitan centres. This decline could be dated to the late 1990s, when two huge postmodernist buildings in London—Terry Farrell’s MI6 building and Michael Hopkins’ Porticullis House in Westminster (although Hopkins absolved himself through the astonishing tube station designed in the building’s undercroft)—were so aggressively statist and



Michael Hopkins, Westminster Jubilee Line Station



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weightily bureaucratic in form that the signifiers given out, always important in postmodernism's sign-fixated discourse, were deeply unattractive. On the contrary, the paradigmatic buildings constructed in London since the late 1990s have been those of Norman Foster, a once vaguely avant-garde technocrat notable for a seemingly Modernist lack of deliberate architectural-historical references and jokes, with an accompanying rhetoric of transparency and sustainability. This leads to what I call Pseudomodernism, which would be defined as Postmodernism's incorporation of a Modernist formal language. Pseudomodernism has several elements. The cramped speculative blocks marketed as 'luxury flats' or 'stunning developments', with their attenuated, vaguely Scandinavian aesthetic; the glass towers whose irregular panels, attempting to alleviate the standardized nature of such buildings, have been dubbed 'barcode façades'; and most of all, the architectural spectacles generated by 'signature' designers, most of whom were once branded 'deconstructivists' (Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, and a legion of lesser lights such as Make architects, who manage to combine formal spectacle and moralistic sobriety).



Norman Foster, Canary Wharf Jubilee Line Station

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Terry Farrell with Liam Gillick, Home Office

Many former postmodernists are now pseudomodernists. The most notable is Sir Terry Farrell, designer of a multitude of quintessentially Thatcherite buildings in the 1980s, from Charing Cross station to MI6. His most pseudomodernist work is the new Home Office building, appropriately a PFI scheme, the first for a government building. With its combination of Weimar Republic curves and De Stijl patterns with eager-to-please colour—which here is provided, as per the Blairite fetish for the ‘creative industries’, by the artist Liam Gillick—it provides a calm, ostentatiously friendly face for the most illiberal administration in the history of British democracy. Nonetheless, the Home Office is merely an example of this idiom in its more domestically scaled version. Unlike most of its contemporaries, it does not aim to be that most essential of twenty-first-century architectural aspirations: an icon. The icon is now the dominant paradigm in architecture to such an extent that at least four different buildings erected in the last few years—one in Hull by Terry Farrell, one in London at Canary Wharf, another in Glasgow, plus an ‘Icona’ near the Olympic site in Stratford—have opted for some variant on the very name ‘Icon’, although they range in use from nondescript blocks of flats to an aquarium.



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A prospective image of London's 'Olympic Skyline' in 2012 released in the mid 2000s showed an entire skyline of competing icons. The skyscrapers announced under Ken Livingstone's tenure as mayor of London—named, in a manner Charles Jencks would appreciate, after gherkins, cheese-graters, walkie-talkies, helter-skelters, a shard—make none of the eclectic gestures and mashings together of different historical styles that characterized postmodernist architecture in developments like Broadgate and the original Canary Wharf. Stone has mostly been replaced by glass. Yet one thing that survives from Postmodernism is the conception of the building as a sign, and here as an easily understandable, instantly grasped sign, strongly opposed to the formal rigours and typological complexities of 'high' Modernism, especially its Brutalist variant. While it's possible that the original Gherkin received its nickname spontaneously, there's little doubt that the other towers, all announced around the same time, had a ready-made little moniker designed to immediately endear them to the general public, in order to present them as something other than the aesthetic tuning of stacked trading floors. Accordingly, by being instantly recognizable for their kinship with a household object, they would aim to become both logo and icon. Perhaps they might eventually become what Jencks describes as 'failed icons', more Millennium Dome than Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim; although always trying for the status of the latter, whose success in bringing well-heeled tourism to the Basque port has made it into a boosterist cliché, whereby the 'Bilbao effect' transforms a mundane city into a cultural capital, replacing unionized factory work or unemployment with insecure service industry jobs.

The other major change from the suburbanism of the Thatcher and Reagan version of neoliberalism is a new focus on the cities, something which is usually encapsulated by the under-investigated word 'regeneration'. Indeed, any form of building in an urban area is usually accompanied by this term. The vaguely religious air is appropriate, as it often accompanies a fundamentally theological conception of architecture, where by standing in





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Daniel Libeskind, buildings for London Metropolitan University

proximity to an outstanding architectural work, the spirit is uplifted, and the non-orthogonal geometry and hyperbolic paraboloids purport, for instance, to represent the experience of war through the disorientation they induce.

An appropriate English example is Salford Quays, where the Docks of Greater Manchester were transformed into a combination of cultural centre and a development of luxury apartments, neatly combining both elements of Pseudomodernism. Two of the architects who most exemplify these ideas are represented there or nearby. There is Daniel Libeskind, whose tendency towards memorializing piety is so pronounced that he was described by Martin Filler as a 'human Yahrzeit candle'. His Imperial War Museum North, with its sloping ceilings and a form which apparently represents a world divided, is supposed to formally incarnate the experience of war. Meanwhile, not far away in central Salford is a bridge by Santiago Calatrava, who is the infrastructural embodiment of Pseudomodernism, his structures seemingly always placed in areas that are busy being transformed from proletarian spaces of work or habitation to 'regenerated' areas of bourgeois colonization. These transformations of space are, it should be remembered, fundamentally different in their





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social consequences to the superficially similar ‘comprehensive redevelopment’ of the postwar period. Once, a slum clearance scheme would involve the slum-dweller being rehoused by the state in something which was, more often than not, superior in terms of space, security of tenure, and hygiene, irrespective of the decades of criticism these schemes have been subjected to. Now that this sort of naïve paternalism is absent, the slums are cleared so that the middle classes can settle in them, something usually excused with a rhetoric of ‘social mixing’, dismantling what had become ‘ghettoes’. The many schemes where sixties council towers have been replaced with PFI blocks are to urban planning what Pseudomodernism is to architecture.

That is, the Modernism of the icon, of the city academies where each fundamentally alike yet bespoke design embodies a vacuous aspirationalism; a Modernism without the politics, without the utopianism, or without any conception of the polis; a Modernism that conceals rather than reveals its functions; Modernism as a shell. This return of Modernist good taste in the New Labour version of neoliberalism has turned architectural Postmodernism, rather surprisingly, into a vanishing mediator. The keystones, references, in-jokes and alleged ‘fun’ of eighties and nineties corporate architecture now evoke neoliberalism’s most naked phase, the period when it didn’t dress itself up in social concern. In the passage from Norman Tebbit to Caroline Flint, the aesthetic of social Darwinism has become cooler, more tasteful, less ostentatiously crass and reactionary, matching the rhetoric.

Service Stations, Service Industry

However, it can be seen that the Pseudomodern takes many of its fundamental ideas, if not its stylistic tropes, from Postmodernism. At this point, we will take a historical detour. Postmodernist architecture was most intelligently formulated by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour in their 1972 book *Learning From Las Vegas*. This focused, via a critique of a caricatured



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corporate Modernism, on the alleged inability of Modernist architecture to communicate adequately with its users. In response, they privileged first of all, signage—the advertising signs of roadside architecture—and secondly, formal references to earlier, most often classical styles of architecture as a means of providing an architecture outside of the ‘dumb box’, as they described it. Charles Jencks’s *Language of Postmodern Architecture*, meanwhile, turned to full-blown neoclassicism, with an accompanying narrative of Modernist hubris, where the dynamiting of one of the US’s rare forays into social housing in St Louis became the precise date for the ‘death’ of Modernism. One element of Venturi’s argument was, regardless of their protestations, a Modernist one—a call for an architectural montage of neon signs and jarring formal clashes. Their praise for the chaos of signage that made up Vegas is, in essence, not vastly different to the rhetoric of the Russian Constructivists, whose work was motivated by what historian Kestutis Paul Zygas calls a ‘component fixation’; where designs were always presented with affixed billboards, posters, slogans, transmitters and tramlines, as if to plug them into the city’s dynamism. Much of the architecture and signage they describe was itself in a kind of Pulp Modernist idiom. Specifically, a 1950s style usually called ‘Googie’ to distinguish it from the apparently more rigorous Modernism of the International Style.

Googie was usually used to draw attention to burger bars, car washes, coffee shops—the name comes from one such, designed by John Lautner. It was an architecture that adapted itself to suburban sprawl and the sheer speed of the freeway by providing dynamic forms which seemed to mimic speed in their formal distortions and attracting the attention of the prospective customer travelling at eighty miles an hour via stretched angular forms and lurid colours. In his book on the subject,⁶ Alan Hess places the style in direct opposition to the high-art Modernism of Mies van der Rohe and his disciples, the classicist glass-skyscraper school that became the spatial *lingua franca* of even the most conformist parts of American capital. What’s interesting here is that in the American context, where Modernism was not as associated with




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social democracy or state socialism as it was in Europe, the debate was purely aesthetic. While the opponents of ‘Googie’ accused it of being crass and commercial, Mies’s Seagram Building was given tinted windows the colour of the client’s brand of whisky. While its outrageous geometrical illusions and structural expressionism were being criticized as mere dressing-up, Mies’s towers ‘expressed’ their structure by entirely decorative I-beams.

So in essence, the debate between classical and pulp Modernism in the US was one of taste. On the one hand there was the luxury aesthetic of the wing of the bourgeoisie that aspired to finer things: New York’s successful attempt in the 1950s to wrest from Paris the accolade of world fine-art capital, with some CIA assistance. In order for this to occur it had to set itself against a more straightforward capitalist hucksterism. In fact, with their deliberate defiance of the rules of gravity and geometry, their brashness and lack of formal precedent, Googie buildings were more true to the original Modernist impulse—futurists or constructivists would have recognized themselves in commercial designers such as Armet & Davis, or in the architecture of McDonalds, Denny’s and Big Boy, more than in Mies van der Rohe, Skidmore Owings & Merrill, Seagram or Lever. It’s also a reminder that the idea of Modernism as ‘paternalist’ imposition on the benighted proletariat, upon which Postmodernism based much of its self-justification, makes sense only if we begin with an extremely limited definition of Modernism. Principally, one that was restricted to the International Style, itself a pernicious legacy of the Museum of Modern Art’s dual depoliticization and classicization of Modernist architecture for American consumption. The Modernism that made it to New York was missing both the crass, neon-lit commercialism of the Berlin department stores and cinemas and the socialist fervour of the ‘New Building’, an anti-architecture for a new society.

It was not, of course, commercial Modernism which was critiqued by Postmodernists, but it can be seen in retrospect as the mediator between postmodernist theory and pseudomodernist practice. The work of Frank Gehry was, from the early 1980s, an



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adaptation of Googie’s Pulp Modernism for the purposes of architecture as art. The style of which he was one of the leading lights, which was termed Deconstructivism by the mid 1980s (in reference to its grounding both in Jacques Derrida’s philosophy and Russian Constructivist form) actually continued many of the formal strategies of the roadside architecture of the 1950s. These architects—Daniel Libeskind among them—were notable both for ignoring the postmodernist imperative to genuflect before neoclassicism, baroque and the traditional street, and for a vocabulary of the non-orthogonal, the exaggerated and the audaciously engineered that owed more to LA diners than it did to the Bauhaus. This style has been applied in the last decade principally for the purposes of museums, galleries and self-contained theme park-like environments such as Gehry’s Experience Music Project in Seattle, or Nigel Coates’s National Centre for Popular Music in Sheffield. Chin-Tao Wu’s *Privatising Culture* lists a few of those that were erected in Britain around the turn of the millennium: ‘you can experience ... a simulated journey into space at the National Space Science Centre in Leicester, find out about geological evolution at the Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh, have fun and learn about science at “@Bristol” in Bristol, or get hands-on experience of the steel industry at the “Making it! Discovery



St Paul’s Visitor Centre, Make Architects




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Centre” in Mansfield.⁷ In terms of their combined Disneyfication and intensification of the city’s museum culture, these are deeply postmodernist buildings, regardless of their form.

The influence of Googie in contemporary urbanism is largely unacknowledged, but it is, I would argue, key to understanding exactly why the ‘signature’ wing of pseudomodernist architecture takes the form it does. Seemingly paradoxically, it aligns itself very closely with the heritage zones of the old capitals. Across the road from St Paul’s Cathedral is a tourist information pavilion by Make architects, the group established by Ken Shuttleworth, job architect on Norman Foster’s Gherkin. In its improbable geometry, its jagged zigzag showing zero interest in the expression of function or good taste, it could easily be selling donuts in 1950s Anaheim. There is by now a large amount of architecture like this, serving most often as a key component of urban regeneration strategies. Buildings for living in are more often done in a mild, asymmetrically patterned form of Scandinavian Modernism, while buildings for culture are allowed to make somewhat wilder gestures. This process can be seen in various buildings for the creative industries in Britain, with their logo-like names: Urbis in Manchester, The Public in West Bromwich, FACT in Liverpool. Its most extensive expression is not, however, in the UK, with its remaining vestiges of representative democracy, but in the oligarchies of Russia, China and the United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi, for instance, has set aside a district solely for ‘iconic’ cultural buildings by Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Norman Foster and Jean Nouvel (who has designed a branch of the Louvre). Barry Lord, the (English) ‘cultural consultant’ for this zone, notes that ‘cultural tourists are older, wealthier, more educated, and they spend more. From an economic point of view, this makes sense’.⁸ No doubt this applies equally well in theory to West Bromwich or Salford.

Much of this architecture has in common with Googie the reduction of the building to a logo, to an instantly memorable image: one that is appreciated in movement, as from a passing car, while quickly walking through an art gallery or museum on the



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way to the gift shop; or indeed while shopping, as with Future Systems and Rem Koolhaas's work for Selfridges and Prada in Birmingham and New York, respectively. Although it may accompany exhibitions of art or simulations of war, it is not an architecture of contemplation but of distraction and speed. Yet it also continues the moralistic rhetoric of postwar Modernism, without any of the actual social uses—local authority housing, comprehensive schools, general hospitals—to which it was originally put. The new Modernism, like the new social democratic parties, is one emptied of all intent to actually improve the living conditions of the majority. Instead, the social use of the pseudo-modernist building, forever groping for the Bilbao effect, appears in a rather Victorian manner to be the uplifting of the spirit via interactive exhibits and installations.

Nobody ever suggested that roadside diners had hyperbolic paraboloid roofs in order to make us better people or induce us to 'aspire', let alone to simulate the experience of war or the Holocaust. Nonetheless, the formal links between Google and today's apparently radical architecture does suggest a truth at its heart—its forbears are in the aesthetics of consumption and advertising, in forms designed to be seen at great speed, not in serene contemplation. It should not surprise us that a style of consumption would return under neoliberalism, but the formal affinities of Pseudomodernism with this aesthetic offers an alternative explanation for what often seems an arbitrary play of forms. By drawing on the futurism of the McCarthy era, the architecture of the equally conformist neoliberal consensus establishes a link between two eras of political stagnation and technological acceleration. It also allows us to reinterpret what purports to be an aesthetic of edification as one of consumption. In the computer-aided creation of futuristic form, today's architects are producing enormous logos, and this is only appropriate. The architecture once described as deconstructivist owes less to Derrida than it does to McDonalds.





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In (Partial) Praise of Urban Britain

The 'Urban Renaissance' is key to all this, and irrespective of its courting of suburbia, New Labour was very much an urban party. Its bases remained in ex-industrial cities, and its hierarchy was drawn from North London, Greater Manchester and Edinburgh. The Tories, irrespective of their capture of the Greater London Authority, are essentially an outer-suburban and rural party, so it will be instructive to find out what they plan to do with this major Blairite shibboleth. Coined in the late 1990s either by the sociologists Ricky Burdett and Anne Power or by Richard Rogers, under the auspices of the Urban Task Force set up by the de facto minister for architecture and planning John Prescott, this has become the optimistic term for a middle-class return to the cities, and an attendant redevelopment of previously demonized urban spaces. It is inextricably associated with the urban paraphernalia I define as Pseudomodern: in terms of architectural artefacts, the urban renaissance has meant lottery-funded centres, entertainment venues and shopping/eating complexes, clustered around disused riverfronts (Salford Quays, Cardiff Bay, the Tyneside ensemble of Baltic, Sage and Millennium Bridge); in housing, the aforementioned 'mixed' blocks of flats on brownfield sites, the privatization of council estates, the reuse of old mills or factories; extensive public art, whether cheerful or gesturing towards sculptor Anthony Gormley's enigmatic figures (his 'Angel of the North', outstretched atop a former coal seam, is perhaps the most famous icon of regeneration), usually symbolizing an area's phoenix-like re-emergence; districts become branded 'quarters'; and, perhaps most curiously, piazzas (or, in the incongruously grandiose planning parlance, 'public realms') appear, with attendant coffee concessions, promising to bring European sophistication to Derby or Portsmouth.

The process is partial and unevenly scattered, but reaches its most spectacular extent in the miles of luxury flats in the former London Docks, the new high-rise skyline of Leeds, the privatized retail district of Liverpool One, and the repopulation of central





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Manchester. Irrespective of the virtues or otherwise of these new spaces, this urban renaissance is widely considered to have ended in aforementioned city centre flats standing empty, as if the exodus from the suburbs to the cities was a confidence trick. Half-finished, empty or cheaply let towers in Glasgow, Stratford or Sheffield act as symbols both of the euphemistic ‘credit crunch’ and of the failure, as suburban boosterism might have it, of an attempt to cajole people into a form of living alien to British predilections—although the linked sub-prime crash in the US was a suburban rather than inner-city phenomenon.

So the suburbs—a fundamentally meaningless term, encompassing everything from Neasden to Bingley via Thamesmead and the entirety of Milton Keynes—are back, and with them a wave of criticism of the urban renaissance. It’s exactly that renaissance that this book seeks to critique, albeit not for the same reasons. British cities deserve better than to be reduced to a systematic regeneration formula of ‘stunning riverside developments’ and post-industrial leisure in the urban core and outside it a sprawl of giant distribution sheds, retail parks and what Patrick Keiller described as ‘reduced versions’ of the houses of 150 years ago.

This book is an autopsy of the urban renaissance, but one driven by constant surprise and fascination at just how strange, individual and architecturally diverse British cities actually are. When researching the articles which eventually formed this book, mostly on foot, I was amazed by this richness, and at how widespread ignorance of it really was. I include my own ignorance in this. Apart from the opening and penultimate chapters, this book is almost exclusively about cities of which I had very little knowledge at the start of 2009, when on the strength of a long rant about my hometown on my weblog, I was commissioned by the architecture paper *Building Design* to write a series on British cities in the recession. The ensuing pieces appeared under the appropriately depressive, underwhelming title *Urban Trawl*. I took a friend, a theatre photographer and lecturer, along to take pictures, knowing that he would not resort to the clichés, sweeping





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perspectives and endless summers so beloved of architectural photographers. This—for better or worse—explains the ubiquitous signage, overcast skies and neck-craning angles you will find in the images in this book. And aside from a final, parenthetical visit to Liverpool, visited for other reasons, this follows the unplanned path we took across Britain for *Building Design*. Many, many cities are absent here, for no reason other than the vagaries of my particular architectural interests and convenience. Belfast, Cumbernauld, Birmingham, Harlow, Bristol, Plymouth, Edinburgh, Hull, Swansea, Coventry, Northampton, Aberdeen, Basildon, Barnsley, Sunderland, Middlesbrough, Preston, Barrow, Leicester and many others have my apologies for the implied but unintended slur on their character. I would have visited if I could.

Apart from quick trips as a child or adult to Newcastle, Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester, these were places of which I had no prior experience, despite being obsessive about British architecture and politics (which may explain my occasionally Kaspar Hauser-like tone). This comes partly of being from the privileged south-east, albeit born and bred in one of its less privileged outposts. When I mentioned where I was going next to friends and relatives, there was often a certain amount of ridicule—*why* would you want to go to Leeds, or Milton Keynes, or Halifax? Why, when we all know that British cities are overpriced, ugly, thuggish and violent places built of concrete and glass, the ‘Crap Towns’ that *The Idler* compiled books about while its founder Tom Hodgkinson retired to the countryside to play at being a gentleman? The argument of this book, as well as the issue it takes with the pieties of Blairite regeneration, is that urban Britain is easily as interesting as the much mythologized piazzas of Italy. The problem is that after being given such a relentless kicking by successive governments and the invariably hostile press, by the 1990s local mettle and pride had broken, so *any* development was good, *anything* that ‘brought jobs to the area’ was permitted, and the towns strained to become something other than what they were, something distinctly less interesting—Florence in pine and glass, Los Angeles without the sunshine—when





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the mess and montage of these multiracial cities provided something which nowhere else in Europe can match. By far the bleakest and least welcoming city we visited for *Building Design* was Cambridge, which seems to suggest that there is an inverse correlation between national esteem for a place's qualities and the actual pleasure one can take walking through it.

The dominance of the south-east, i.e. of the increasingly vast London Metro Area, is threatened only very slightly by Greater Manchester—hence the horror of BBC workers on realizing their jobs were moving to Salford, a shocking two-hour train ride away from the capital—and by nowhere else in England (Scotland, as in so much else, is a different story). This is only partly because London's sheer size has such an overwhelming gravitational pull. In strict census terms, the nearest competitor is Birmingham, with less than one seventh of its population. If taken as conurbations, as continuous urban areas without rural interruption, then Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, Tyneside, Leeds, all suddenly become much larger—the populations of Nottingham and Newcastle more than double, while Manchester's leaps from around 400,000 to 2.5 million. Local government has not factored this in since the effective abolition of the Metropolitan Councils of the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Tyne & Wear and West Yorkshire in the 1980s, along with the more notorious destruction of the Greater London Council. The capital partly recovered from this through the less powerful, more symbolic Greater London Authority, but the smaller metropolises never got theirs back in any way, shape or form. Accordingly, they tend to think of themselves as being far more provincial than they actually are. Cities like Sheffield or Liverpool too often play at being villages, with deleterious consequences for their true urban qualities; while the counter-movement to give them Urban Renaissance piazzas and towers ignores their actual features in a different but equally disastrous way, hence all those 'urban villages' bringing hermetic, provincial rural mores into the heart of the city.

Several books guided this guide, principal among them one




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published in 1934, a travel book called *English Journey* by the Bradfordian writer J. B. Priestley.⁹ In the following decade it was so widely read as to become one of those semi-mythical books that ‘won the ’45 election for Labour’—a sharp, populist, politely angry account of a deliberate attempt to look England in the face, from Southampton to Newcastle. This book is consciously written in Priestley’s shadow, albeit extending it outside of the dubious centrality of England, and focused much more strictly on buildings rather than anecdote and general observation. A few others also cast a heavy shadow—the mid-century journeys of Ian Nairn, the 1990s *dérives* of Patrick Keiller—and what links all three, other than my (usually hidden) references to them here, is a disinterest in or critique of Heritage England, and the pervasive myth of either an overcrowded or a green and pleasant land.



By the mid nineteenth century, this was the only country in the world which had more urban than rural inhabitants. Even now, after a century of sentimentalism about the countryside, around 90 per cent of us live in essentially urban areas, and although around 70 per cent of the landmass is still agricultural land, only 300,000 people actually work it. This might be an urban island, but extraordinarily Penguin Books were able to release a set of twenty books in 2009 called *English Journeys*, in obvious reference to Priestley, every single one of which dealt with the countryside. The bulk of Priestley’s account was urban, this being where the overwhelming majority of the English lived. At the end of this survey of a country torn between north and south, rich and poor, Priestley listed three Englands that he had found on this journey, all of them embodied in their man-made structures. The first was the countryside, an area of patchwork fields and local stone, one which has ‘long since ceased to make its own living’, pretty in its desuetude, if over-preserved. The second was that of the Industrial Revolution, of iron, brick, smokestacks and back-to-backs, more ‘real’ than the first but ruthlessly inhumane towards its inhabitants. Last was a third, commercial world of arterial roads, Tudorbethan suburbia, art deco factories and cinemas; cheap and ersatz, but without the brutality of the second.





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Since Priestley, we could add a fourth and fifth England, or rather a fourth or fifth *Britain*, as this book attempts to avoid what Tom Nairn calls ‘Englishry’. These are, respectively, the country of the postwar settlement, of council estates, Arndale centres and campus universities; and the post-1979 England of business parks, Barratt homes, riverside ‘stunning developments’, out-of-town shopping and distribution centres. This book is, at heart, an architectural guide to *this* country, to Britains four and five. It charts both the ambiguous remains of the fourth, and the fifth’s frequent determination to wipe out any architectural trace of it, just as it tries to decimate the remnants of its collectivist politics—and here I attempt to treat Britain five with much the same retrospective contempt as it shows its predecessor, largely for the reason that I find its neoliberal politics every bit as repugnant as it does those of its socialist forbear. This is not, however, a ruminative book about urbanism that touches on architecture to illustrate an argument, but one where architecture itself is central, much as it is in New Labour’s Change We See campaign. ‘By these stones shall we be judged’, said the leader of Vienna’s City Council in his opening speech for the Karl-Marx-Hof, the gigantic council estate that Austrian Fascists would bombard a year later. This book uses architecture in an unashamedly subjective fashion to illustrate politics and vice versa, and aims most of all to awake in the reader an attention to their urban environment, in the hope that they will see it as something consciously made, something formed, rather than as a more-or-less irritating backdrop to the daily commute, a possible investment or a series of monuments and eyesores. Finally, if this book does that, it is in the hope that from there, people can think about how they can consciously make and consciously transform their environment.

I will begin, then, with the environment that did most to shape me.







Chapter One

Southampton: Terminus City

‘I will begin, I said, where a man might first land, at Southampton.’ This is how J. B. Priestley opens *English Journey*, and so begin the accounts of sundry other English travellers from the Edwardian era up to the 1970s. Until Heathrow replaced it, Southampton was where most visitors or returning travellers entered the country. Now, however, the main entities to land at and depart from Southampton are consumer goods, manufactured in China, unloaded at the city’s Container Port, and freighted round the country by rail and lorry. What hasn’t changed about the town is the way it appeared to Priestley as something indistinct, something that wasn’t quite a place. ‘It had no existence in my mind as a real town, where you could buy and sell and bring up children; it existed only as a muddle of railway sidings, level crossings, customs houses and dock sheds; something to be done with as soon as possible’. Well, children are born there, and they do grow up there. I was, and I did. And things are most certainly bought and sold in Southampton.

Although this book is written in great suspicion of the New Labour strategy of regeneration via the ‘creative industries’ and the clawing back of municipal pride from Thatcherite underdevelopment via sheds for sponsorship, relational aesthetics or ‘interactivity’, there is a hint—only a hint—of jealousy there. That is, jealousy that even though I may hate both the built result and its ideological legitimation, at least there is *some* kind of civic





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pride in places like Manchester or Gateshead, both on the part of their people and their architects and a sense that these cities are worth visiting for something above and beyond shopping. Southampton missed the meeting where the ‘urban renaissance’ was decided upon—perhaps because, despite being in the lower rungs of the twenty largest cities in Britain, it was never quite fully urban in the sense of being ‘civic’. Too southern and too surrounded by the Tory heartland for the poor-but-sexy cool by association of northern industrial cities; too close to London to attain an identity and culture of its own.

Even Southampton’s two Universities (one of which is a Russell Group research colossus) are so science-centric that the large student population doesn’t lead to any attendant artiness. Culture is regarded with suspicion within the M27, the motorway which encloses it and connects it to Portsmouth. Southampton is a thousand-year-old nowhere. Yet this, after all, might be what distinguishes it. I used to be annoyed by the way that whenever my home town was mentioned in a work of art—from Lennon’s ‘Ballad of John and Yoko’ to Wyndham Lewis’s travelogue *Snooty Baronet*—they never said anything about the town itself. It was only as a place to pass through. Off the boat, onto the train and into Waterloo in one hour fifteen. Southampton was Heathrow before Heathrow, and has never quite known what to do with itself since the ship was succeeded by the jet. I was missing the point though: Southampton is the city as terminus. One of the few to have described what he saw when he arrived was ex-colonial boy J. G. Ballard, who wrote in his memoir *Miracles of Life* of his shocked first vision of England in 1946.

The *Arrawa* docked at Southampton, under a cold sky so grey and low that I could hardly believe this was the England I had read and heard so much about. Small, putty-faced people moved around, shabbily dressed and with a haunted air. Looking down from the rail, I noticed that the streets near the docks were lined with what seemed to be black perambulators, some sort of coal scuttle, I assumed, used for bunkering ships. Later I learned that these were British cars, a species I had never seen before.¹⁰





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Then he's straight off to London, never looking back.

The secret story of Southampton's rise to (brief) prominence is deeply unnerving for those who like a city to be marked by the ambition of its architecture, or those who long for the South-East's grip on the country to be loosened. In the early twentieth century, Southampton overtook Liverpool as Britain's major passenger port. At exactly the point when Liverpool was erecting megacity monuments along the Pier Head, either to herald arrival at the centre of Empire or the grandeur of Liverpool itself, its business was being swiped by Southampton, with the White Star Line transferring there in 1907 and Cunard following in 1921. (Recently Liverpool has been threatening a belated revenge, with various cruise companies considering a move back to Merseyside, on the grounds that their passengers might want something to look at during their stop-off in England.) It is the misfortune of Southampton to have prospered most during the most uninspired period in British architectural history, the long slumber that lasted from 1914 to 1945. The shipping companies and Port Authorities built no Liver Building here, no 'Graces'. Southampton didn't make a distracting fuss about itself, and the provinces were not to get any more ideas above their station.

Southampton, like Coventry, Plymouth and east London, nearly became a non-place in a quite literal sense. In November 1940 the centre was flattened and thousands fled the city, many sleeping rough in the surrounding countryside to avoid returning to the inferno. Yet what happened when reconstruction came? Southampton is twinned with Le Havre, a French port that was similarly ruthlessly blitzed, yet Auguste Perret's reconstruction of that city as a series of neoclassical towers and boulevards was, while by no means fearlessly Modernist, confident, contemporary, urban, large-scaled, proud. Southampton got a one-storey Portland Stone shopping parade, now featuring the faded imprints of 1990s shop signs, since the shops have almost all moved into the city's newly-built covered malls. The planners of Le Havre might have cast covetous glances across the Atlantic at the US's skyscrapers and daylight factories, but those of 1940s





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Holy Rood Church

Southampton recognized that the future lay somewhere else in the United States. In *The Buildings of England*, David Lloyd described the parade as being akin to ‘an up-and-coming Mid-Western town with planning control and Portland stone’. While the gigantic ships, those ribbon-windowed beauties that inspired a million Modernist buildings, sailed to New York from just a few yards away, Southampton channelled the spirit of Iowa.



A ghost McDonalds, Above Bar



SOUTHAMPTON: TERMINUS CITY



Shirley Towers

However, Southampton City Council took a thirty-year detour before realizing in the 1990s that Southampton's destiny was to be the most American city in Britain, in the least glamorous possible sense. In *Soft City*, an early psychogeographic study marked by a very early 1970s paranoia, Jonathan Raban accidentally found himself in a standard exemplar of the British transformation of Corbusian utopia into dystopia. A planned satellite suburb on the edges of Southampton, a 'vast, cheap storage unit for nearly 20,000 people', Millbrook seemed to be the perfect embodiment of well-meaning failure, producing an isolated and disturbing new landscape. Architecturally, Millbrook is not too bad—the towers, especially, by the Tyneside firm Ryder & Yates, are clever, patterned things—but in terms of planning it's as desolate now as it no doubt was in 1974, and the pitched roofs on the lower blocks don't lessen the effect; today they're as disconnected as ever. Millbrook Towers, the tallest building in the city placed bizarrely in its outer suburbs, may be an elegant building, but doubtless that was little consolation to its inhabitants when recently the lifts were out of action for eight months.¹¹ Raban concludes: 'were one to read Millbrook as a novel, one might say that the author had read and copied all the fashionable books without understanding them, and had produced a typical minor work in which all the passions



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and prejudices of the current masterpieces were unconsciously and artlessly reflected.’¹²

Appropriately, the work of the city architect who planned Millbrook—Leon Berger, a Modernist trained in Liverpool and perhaps intent on applying some of its architectural ambition to its rival—is indeed a sort of amalgam of the period’s motifs and clichés, applied with some wit, occasional panache and more occasionally, real talent. *Zeilenbau* (‘line-building’, a rationalist plan popularized at the Bauhaus in the 1920s) arrangements of disconnected blocks in open space at the estates on the eastern edges like Weston Shore or Thornhill; mixed development everywhere else, containing some or all of *béton brut*, rubble stone, weatherboarding, bare stock brick, slabs and points in varying quantities. Yet Millbrook’s bleakness coincided with some extraordinary architecture.

Just outside the Central Station is Wyndham Court, designed in 1966 for the City Council by Lyons Israel Ellis, a firm that acted as finishing school for the more famous New Brutalist architects of the period like James Stirling, architect of the Leicester Engineering Building among others, and Brutalism’s main theorists



Wyndham Court





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and propagandists, Alison and Peter Smithson. Listed in the 1990s against knee-jerk opposition from the local press, this is by far the finest twentieth-century building in the city. Without employing the easy formal references that mark the city's post-1979 shopping centres and flats, it immediately evokes the cruise behemoths that sailed from the nearby port. A glorious concrete Cunard, impossible to ignore, moored in a city otherwise intent that nobody should notice it—and it's still, as the satellite dishes imply, a functioning block of social housing, which would be unlikely now in London or Manchester. It clearly hasn't been cleaned in a very long time, and as Joel, gobsmacked, takes several photos, two youths shout over at us, in the fast Estuary/Yokel hybrid that is the Sotonian accent, '*It wasn't my fault my dad didn't know johnnies broke!*' His urbane Bradfordian sensibilities offended, he asks 'Can you translate from the vernacular?', unable to imagine that they've been apologizing to us for their very existence. Adjacent is a small bomb site-cum-park, redbrick stumps of buildings, benches, rats and bristling vegetation.

Southampton had long been one of the best British candidates for a *Ville Radieuse*. Victorian planning created The Avenue, a tree-lined boulevard that ran all the way to the 'Gateway to Empire', a series of central parks; while the interwar years saw the building of the cohesive, verdant garden estates designed by the Quaker architect Herbert Collins. Collins's little Letchworths in the northern suburbs were inadequately emulated by the city council in the form of the inept Flower Estate adjacent to the university, its 'workers' cottages' and treeless streets the incongruous setting for perhaps the nastiest of its wide variety of nasty places. This is a place of which I have particularly bitter memories, having lived there as a teenager: most of what I remember is ubiquitous casual violence, something especially fearsome in 'Daisy Dip', the estate's little park, where a friend was baseball-batted for dyeing his hair.

Unlikely as it may seem for a town in Hampshire, Southampton is remarkably violent: Home Office statistics in 2008 listed it as Britain's third 'most dangerous city', with more violent acts per





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population than anywhere else other than Manchester and Sheffield, both far larger cities.¹³ Much of this violence seems connected to a town vs gown divide in a city where the smug, affluent gown meets a chronically depressed town. Someone in Liverpool once impressed upon me that the difference between these two one-time transatlantic ports, the thing that makes the smaller of them the more brutal, is the lack of sentiment and civic pride. Liverpool has a whole mythology, however dewy-eyed, of its own importance and civic munificence; Southampton knows it fucking hates Portsmouth but proclaims very little else about itself. At a stretch, perhaps, it is proud of being the embarkation point of the ‘world’s biggest metaphor’ in 1912, and the former home of Matthew Le Tissier, England’s most underrated footballer.

It was not always so mediocre; sometimes the Southampton built in the 1950s and 1960s could be positively dramatic. Leon Berger’s work took ‘mixed development’ to an occasionally preposterous extreme. A one-storey house next to a three-storey block of flats next to an eighteen-storey tower, Berger’s Shirley Estate exemplifies what is striking about this architecture. I used to look at this place with some awe as a teenager, Bowie’s ‘Warszawa’ running round in my head. This is appropriate, as Polish is now heard almost as often in Shirley as English, in a town which has always had a large Eastern European contingent—I propose a twinning of Stegny and Thornhill. In winter, the tower is shrouded in mist, as if it were a mirage. None of the gardens are private, which we’re now supposed to think is a bad thing, and the tower is simply enormous, nearly as wide as it is tall, infilled with panels of rubble as if to evoke the medieval town centre. There are three of these, in Shirley, Redbridge and St Mary’s, and from an elevated point they become beacons in this sprawling, low-rise city, seeming to point to somewhere out of here.

The buildings the council didn’t sponsor, those in the marvelously named central strip Above Bar and its environs, are in the style recently and amusingly described by Stephen Bayley as ‘John Lewis Modernism’, here at its most nondescript. When





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East Street Shopping Centre

containerization and Heathrow destroyed Southampton's *raison d'être*, it gradually realized its future was to become Hampshire's Shopping Extravaganza, dragging the burghers of the New Forest, Romsey, Winchester *et al.* into the city to buy stuff. The city went through several drafts and false starts before it finally succeeded in its aims with the gigantic WestQuay in the twenty-first century. Draft One: East Street Shopping Centre, designed in the late 1960s. Nobody comes here. I can't remember anyone *ever* coming here. It adjoins a huge concrete office block, the Capital Tower, which is architecturally undistinguished but has a classic Brutalist escape staircase offsetting the mediocrity of the rest. Its apparatus of ramps and car parks cuts the centre off from the inner city and from St Mary's, the district that is Southampton's beating heart (currently more of a pacemaker). I recently found a copy of Le Corbusier's *The Modulor* in East Street Oxfam. It seemed apt.

East Street, actually placed in (or rather terminating) a street, and adjoining a tall, hard building, was clearly not sufficiently suburban. Draft Two, built in the early nineties: the post-modernist mall of the Bargate Centre sited next to the titular Bargate itself, an 'iconic' medieval remnant, and designed by the prolific and hopelessly mediocre local architects W. H. Saunders.





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In Southampton even ‘alternative’ culture happens in shopping malls, and the Bargate found its niche in the late 1990s by catering to ravers, skaters, Goths and metallers rather than the original targets of tourists, children and their harassed parents. The medieval walls, and flats used by the council for emergency housing, sit at the Bargate Centre’s edges.

The Bargate is one of four big malls in the city centre. On the outskirts Eastleigh, a former railway works with houses attached, adds another, the Swan Centre. It’s now being redesigned in a metallic, vaguely deconstructivist manner, indicating that its bricky Postmodernism has been thoroughly superseded as the architecture of retail. I used to live right next to this mall, which swept away Victorian market streets, much to my joy. As a child I *loved* malls. We never used that Americanism (these were the more prosaic *Shopping Centres*), but I had a birthday in McDonalds with branded party hats and gifts, I ate Donuts and Deep Pan Pizza, and as adolescence hit I listlessly read magazines in WH Smith until I was thrown out. I was glad when I realized there was a word, loitering, for this pastime.

Upon moving into the city proper, my affections were transferred to the Marlands, Draft Three of the Sotonian Mall, which replaced a bus station (the city hasn’t had this basic amenity in decades) and encased under fibreglass a fragment of the Victorian street it replaced, eating it up as a gesture of genuflection to complement the atrocious, grinning stone-clad façade. The Marlands nearly went bankrupt, but was transformed into the expressively named ‘The Mall’, where it now reaches a canopy out into some bland postwar blocks. Linked by a walkway at the back—traversing a site that dramatically slopes down to what was once the waterfront—to car parks and an Asda, the Marlands was the first strike in the transformation of a huge swathe of reclaimed land into the aforementioned up and coming (or by now, down and out) Mid-Western town, after Leon Berger’s failed attempts at designing a coherent city. A huge site once occupied by a cable works and a power station was, in the late 1990s, turned into a series of strip malls and boxes. As it went up, curtain-walled office





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blocks went down, wrapped in plastic like Laura Palmer before being thrown into the sea. Then came the strip malls of Western Esplanade, then some rather functionalist car parks, then the vast WestQuay, the retail behemoth for which the others were merely unsuccessful drafts—and to which we will return later. Southampton today is an experiment, exurban America without the sun or the space.

In Search of Solent City

In 2008 the Liberal Democrat MP for Eastleigh and failed leadership candidate Chris Huhne condemned proposals for the building of thousands of new homes in his constituency.¹⁴ This, he claimed, was merely the return after several decades of the ‘Solent City’, which would destroy the local identity of such distinctive, delightful places as Chandler’s Ford, Havant, Paulsgrove and Locks Heath. In the local press this was reported as if everyone would know what the Solent City was, and why it was such a bad thing. Solent City was a mid-1960s proposal by the Harold Wilson government for a new metropolis. It would be made up of Southampton and Portsmouth with a Milton Keynes-style grid-planned linear city strung between the two towns, uniting them into one of the largest and most powerful cities in the country and creating for the first time in centuries a southern city which could resist the pull of London. The Solent City never came to pass, but perhaps its phantom persists in the myths the area tells about itself. The Southampton–Portsmouth war via football, which has caused full-scale riots at least twice in the past decade, says a surprising amount about politics and culture in this unglamorous bit of Southern England. As a Sotonian with family from Portsmouth and Fareham, I don’t quite have the requisite visceral hatred for Pompey that is customary (although I should point out here I don’t go as far as my Grandma, who always claimed to ‘support both’). In any case, what is really interesting in the rivalry is that the alleged historical and political reasons for the intense mutual hatred have been imposed post-facto. For instance, Portsmouth





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supporters have always claimed that their chosen insult, ‘scum’, comes from ‘Southampton Corporation Union Men’, in reference to a dock strike allegedly broken by Southampton dockers in the 1930s. As Southampton is a commercial port and Portsmouth a military one, this is of course implausible, and I’ve never come across a reference to it in histories of either city outside of the abundant literature of the footballing rivalry itself.

The significance of the rivalry is that both of these cities, in relatively apolitical parts of the country, justify their sporting hatreds largely through reference to history (mutual enmity between military and civilian England) and left-wing politics (through imaginary breaches of working-class solidarity). The two cities like to vie for the roughest reputation via evident untruths. So Southampton is denigrated as posh and semi-rural because Winchester and the New Forest are nearby. A quick trip to St Mary’s or Thornhill should rectify this misapprehension. Portsmouth is alleged to be an insular island, yet has played the Blairite iconic architecture/urban regeneration game far more effectively, with its Spinnaker observation tower and glass skyscrapers forming an incongruously slick enclave in amongst the two-up-two-downs. Southampton’s ‘urban renaissance’ entailed nondescript retail and Barratt boxes. British cities’ perceptions of each other, when refracted through the compulsory agonism of a sporting rivalry, tend to get very skewed. On close investigation, these rivalries are usually built on myth, and are very recent. The Southampton–Portsmouth football rivalry began in the late 1960s, at the exact point that Colin Buchanan was charged by the Wilson government with developing a plan for the ‘Southampton–Portsmouth Supercity’. It could be argued that the Saints/Pompey hatred is what happened instead of this south coast megalopolis. Rather than a real modernity, we got dim-witted atavism—but one justified with recourse to the serious politics it effectively replaced.

There were two competing ideas about the Solent City: the grid proposed by Colin Buchanan, and the later proposals from a group of sociologists, architects and critics (Paul Barker, Reyner





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Fawley Refinery

Banham, Peter Hall and Cedric Price, respectively) in *Non-Plan—Experiment in Freedom*, a once famous 1969 special in the magazine *New Society*, which advocated the removal of planning controls, using the Solent City as an exemplar. The enormous oil refinery at Fawley, which even now presents itself to the hillier parts of Southampton at night as a distant and beautiful neon-lit metropolis, was to be given extra *son et lumière* by the non-planners, while the space in between would be made up of festive spaces, caravans, instant cities springing up and then disappearing along the M27. Without any of the japey implied in the *New*



Eastleigh Station





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Society writers' suggestions, a Non-Plan is essentially what happened when Buchanan's Solent City was abandoned. Appropriately, given Huhne's disdain, Eastleigh exemplifies the sort of indeterminate space which Solent City would have occupied, and is indicative of what happened instead. The area likes to think of itself as a semi-rural Hampshire Arcadia, but with the exception of the New Forest this is far from the truth. Along with Gosport, the largest part of the conurbation that isn't either Southampton or Portsmouth itself, Eastleigh is a small company town, planned as a complete entity in the late nineteenth century for the South-Western Railway. It was settled by workers transferred from the works at Nine Elms, meaning that it was for a while a south London enclave in Hampshire, and I swear the accent, at least, survived until the 1990s. On moving aged twelve to a council estate within the Southampton boundaries, not only did I find the semis and front gardens suspiciously posh-looking, but I also thought the estate kids' semi-yokel accent to be surprising and hilarious, which guaranteed me some perhaps slightly deserved kickings.



I suspect that by the 1950s Eastleigh had forgotten it was once a colony of London, and the gridiron plan was abandoned from the thirties onwards, so although incongruously dense at the centre it is mostly dispersed, exurban, straggling: the bleak reality of the libertarian promises of the Non-Plan which once aimed to turn the area into a discontinuous funfest. In walking distance from the centre is Southampton Airport, built on the site of an interwar camp for Jewish refugees midway from Eastern Europe to New York City—although this bit of history is seldom mentioned, lest it imply that Southampton was once not provincial, with a history based on transatlantic travel, migration and internationalism. Adjacent, The Lakes, an abandoned industrial site given its own railway and turned into a small pleasure park, carries perhaps a hint of Non-Plan in its conversion of brownfield into leisure. Eastleigh had its brief moment in the national news in the mid nineties when its Tory MP, Stephen Milligan, was found dead with orange in mouth, plastic bag on head and suspenders on legs.





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Eastleigh Works

I recall BBC News visiting the town, an incredible, improbable breaking of telly into life.

The London–Southampton train, which I’ve taken hundreds of times in the last eleven years, goes through Eastleigh in its last stretch, and hence through an enormous cargoscape of rusting vintage carriages and freight trains carrying Chinese containers, Southampton’s Ford Transit factory visible in the distance. So I remember seeing the bombed-out church, a place which to me always seemed incomparably ancient (I was so disappointed when I realized it was Victorian), restored in the late 1990s and early 2000s as a block of flats, improbably enough. It won an *Evening Standard* award for housing, and whether or not it was deconsecrated, the move from God to property seems highly symbolic. Some of what I remember is still there, but the inner streets—Cranbury Road, where I lived, Desborough, Chamberlayne, Derby Road, Factory Road—have a drinking ban in place to stop general ultraviolence from occurring in the residential area. It’s not hard to see why this might occur, as the place looks traumatized. Everyone looks ill, half the shops are charity shops (not *wholly* a bad thing, but nor is it a sign of great economic health), and the first conversation I hear when I sit down with my drink in the Wagon Works, on my first visit to the town centre in over a decade, begins: ‘Soon it’ll be an Islamic





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Republic ... Enoch was right ... still, there'll never be rivers of blood 'cos the English don't have the guts.' I remembered that when I grew up here most of my friends were second/third generation Asian, and I wondered, looking round town at all the white faces, whether they all escaped to the other side of the M27, or hopefully further than that.

It's a bizarre leap to blame immigration for Eastleigh's desuetude. I once came across someone describing Eastleigh as a Northern town lost in Hampshire, which is true in part (though certainly not at the super-affluent outskirts). It's a very thorough bit of planning, and its buildings are a residue of first, Victorian civic culture—the town hall, the two-up-two-downs, the churches, the red-brick Gothic school—and later, something else, something perhaps promising transformation: the garden city estates outside the grid; the 'Labour Party House'; The Comrades Club, which I'm amazed and pleased to see is still called The Comrades Club, though I suspect it's a karaoke and real ale fest rather than a hotbed of agitprop theatre. The town was once a Labour stronghold, but boundary changes and drift meant that by the 1970s it was a Tory seat. My Dad tells me that the town once had the second highest Labour membership in the south of England (after Woolwich), but only because anyone who was on the 'tote', buying a ticket for the party-run pools from the Labour canvassers, became an automatic 'member'. It's hard to imagine any active politics there now, corrupt or otherwise, as it's gone the way of most places of once-skilled labour—confused, lost, lumpen.

The place is planned for industry, very precisely. Railway Works at one end, Pirelli Cables factory at the other, with a grid of terraces in between and semis at the sides; more channelled and less 'adaptable' than any Modernist plan, although like all Victorian urbanism it's seen as some sort of force of nature, *the way things have always been*, rather than something directed and planned for industrial, pecuniary purposes. As it is, all the industries I remember being here even in the early 1990s are now gone: the Mr Kipling factory from whence we got slabs of chocolate and the revelation that Tesco cakes were exactly the same as the





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Kipling cakes, the huge railway works, once one of the biggest in the country (as presumably there's no demand for new trains in the botched, privatized railway network). Most alarming is the disappearance of the Pirelli factory; I remember it always just in the near distance, at the end of Factory Road. In its place are new Heritage Flats, with street names taken from the handful of famous residents: Joe Meek's bleach blond boy, Heinz Burt from The Tornados, next to Benny Hill Close. Amusingly enough, there have been proposals to rename Factory Road because it gives the wrong impression of the place. At the centre of Eastleigh is what can only be described as a Socialist Realist sculpture depicting a railwayman, erected around the time the railway works was being closed down. Eastleigh is the truth of the arcadia Chris Huhne wants to save from 'urban sprawl'. If Eastleigh has a history, it's made up of grids, planning, towns appearing out of nowhere, industrialization and infrastructure, closely linked to the metropolis to the point of originally being inhabited by Londoners—but with its renamings and pseudo-Victorian architecture it tries to rewrite itself into a quaint little town, which it never actually was. The Solent City is nearer to the historical reality of this place than the bizarre village fantasies of Benny Hill Close.



Eastern Dock

Like the abortive Solent City, Southampton itself has two centres, or a centre and an ex-centre. The ex-centre is where you could almost believe that you were in a great port city rather than a failed, dead yachting and shopping town. It is centred on two ex-places: the former Southampton Terminus, closed by infamous 1960s Conservative rationalizer Dr Richard Beeching, and the Eastern Docks, where the Titanic set sail in 1912. Heritage Southampton is entirely obsessed with the Titanic, not for any good reason, but because it's famous. The recently elected Tory Council had planned to sell off part of what is the City Art Gallery collection, one of the finest in non-metropolitan Britain, for the sake of creating a Titanic Museum in a 'cultural quarter' by





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the Civic Centre. Plans were laid to flog parts of a collection that features Picasso, Rodin, Blake, Flemish masters and Vorticists, Op Artists and Renaissance altarpieces, in favour of yet another attempt to drag tourists kicking and screaming to an increasingly provincial town. Thankfully, the council were (perhaps temporarily) deterred by a public campaign and a petition, which, while failing to sway the local press, found wide support outside of Southampton and among the city's usually quiet intelligentsia. The planned Titanic Museum will still go ahead, using what are darkly described as 'alternative sources' of funding.

There is in fact a permanent exhibition about the Titanic in the Maritime Museum by the Eastern Docks. However, that's in the ex-centre. The Civic Centre is far nearer to the West Quay uber-mall and the Western Docks. The new Heritage Museum will include an Interactive Model of the Titanic, while the building entails a glass extension and remodelling of one wing of the 1930s Civic Centre, to be designed by award-winning regeneration engineers Wilkinson Eyre. It'll also be the first time—after a housing scheme by Richard Rogers was recently rejected—that an architect of any note has built in the city (as opposed to its University) since the 1960s. The 'cultural district', a belated sop to something other than mammon in a city that is otherwise cravenly devoted to it, is planned to include a 'mixed use' block by once famous 1980s postmodernists CZWG, but so far the only part of the area where building has actually taken place involves the replacement of an international style block of the 1960s with an international style block of the 2000s, in an act of astounding pointlessness. The redevelopment of the (listed) interwar Civic Centre has annoyed the traditionalist likes of *Private Eye*'s 'Nooks and Corners' column, but as this stripped classical complex is already functionally little more than a roundabout flanked by offices and malls worthy of a business park in Fareham, the damage was done a long time ago. The suspicion that Wilkinson Eyre were hired because the councillors had seen their Mary Rose Museum in Portsmouth, rather than for the work they had produced elsewhere, is inescapable. No other towns really exist.





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South Western Hotel

But get someone to drop you off at the old Terminus blindfolded, take off the blindfold, look around, and you could believe you were Somewhere. There's a lush square ringed by stylish bow-windowed terraces, some Gin Palace-like Art Nouveau hotels, the handsome former station and, oddest of all, the South Western Hotel. Now—obviously—luxury flats, this was The Hotel Where The Titanic's Passengers Stayed, a wonderfully ridiculous high-Victorian confection that would look at home in South Kensington. More interesting is the block adjacent, a 1920s extension of the hotel. It's a freakish anomaly in the city, an example of hard *Grosstadtarchitektur*, eight storeys, minimal classical ornament: perhaps inspiration was taken from the thousands of New Yorkers who must have stayed here.

According entirely with the 'Manhattanism' described by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas in his book *Delirious New York*, the South Western Hotel is an example of the 'culture of congestion', irrespective of its serene 1920s façade. Its skyline is never quite clean or precise, due to a series of accretions—first the 1870s hotel given its dramatic 1920s extension, then some more utilitarian extra storeys added during its successive uses as the local BBC headquarters between the 1960s and the 1990s, and its subsequent use as luxury flats, all creating an illegible jumble. Even on the Portland stone front of the 1920s extension, one corner abandons





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the classical symmetry, going off in its own utilitarian direction, leading to the seedy stock brick of the sides facing the train shed. It's as if the metropolitan skyline the city otherwise lacked were incarnated solely in this building, dominating everything around it, especially from the raised vantage point of the 1970s Itchen Bridge. The South Western Hotel introduces into Southampton a robust urban scale that is replicated nowhere else in the town, with nothing taller (bar the Civic Centre clock tower) built for half a century. Its environs are one of the few places where you can get some idea of what the first skyscrapers might have been like, in that the two-storey surroundings are dominated by something four times their height, and nothing has really attempted to follow it in the immediate area, so it still suggests an imminent departure for somewhere more exciting, frozen in time. If the Terminus Station were reopened, then the city's centre of gravity would be shifted from a gigantic retail park to a disparate, complex city, near to the depressed council estates of Northam, St Mary's and Holy Rood, the (small but quite lovely) walled town, and some attempts at civic architecture courtesy of Cunard, White Star and the South-Western Railway. The station is now a casino.

The Titanic ought to be a bitter, painful memory for Southampton, because most of the crew—those who weren't allowed into the lifeboats—were from the town, and most of them were from the slums of Northam. Their pay was cancelled immediately, and White Star gave no benefits or compensation, giving a clue as to why this Hampshire town became stridently red after World War One: a sudden shocking realization that, regardless of all that King and Country nonsense, the ruling class *doesn't care about you*, a shock which has since dissipated into aiming to join the ruling class (think of the way early 2000s slick soulboy Craig David, hailing from the Holy Rood council estate, used to refer to himself in the third person, talking about himself as 'Craig David the Brand'). Instead, this mass death is something we revel in, because it reminds us of Kate Winslet posing nude for Leonardo DiCaprio, or our heroes embracing atop the ship's stern while Céline Dion warbles in the background. The Isle of Wight ferries





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depart from here, and were the focus of solidarity actions with the Vestas wind turbine factory occupation on the Island in 2009, a reminder that the city is not as defeated as it may first appear. The wonderfully silly Edwardian dock building adjacent is now Maxim's Casino.

The area around the former eastern docks and the former Terminus is where most new residential development is concentrated. New Southampton looks much the same as New Everywhere Else, with the proviso that it took them a little while longer to cotton onto the pseudomodernist turn, so pitched roofs and 'decorative' banded brickwork continued here for longer than in other cities. It includes the 'French Quarter' (Southampton is lucky enough to have only one 'Quarter', although a Cultural Quarter has been promised for some time), which contains a 'Property Café'. Near to all this is a fifty-year-old attempt to design a new city district, the Holy Rood estate, designed to replace a slum bombed during World War Two. Designed by Lyons Israel Ellis, it has always seemed the poor relation to their later masterpiece, Wyndham Court.

By comparison, Holy Rood is a much more straightforward scattering of low and medium-rise Modernist blocks, using the soft-Brutalist vernacular of stock-brick and concrete. The interesting things about it come from the layout rather than the



Holy Rood Estate





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aesthetic, which is robust but not tectonically exciting. You pass under buildings, through courtyards and gardens. (You can't drink there, as signs point out.) At one end, a piece of public art, an abstracted steel seaman carrying a ship, manages to be surprisingly good, providing a signpost for the place which doesn't make it look institutional without going for the usual alternative of being brightly patronizing. The effects of aerial bombardment are visible on practically every corner round here, if you look hard enough, but Holy Rood Church is the most eloquent statement of it, a bombed-out church which was left in its ruined state as a memorial to the Merchant Navy. It has become a generalized memorial space, so there is a plaque dedicated to the dead of the Falklands War (rather grotesquely putting this dirty little war on the same level as the fight against Nazi Germany) as well as an earlier memorial to the Titanic.

Near here is the original Eastern Dock, the one from which the Titanic (and all the other ships that didn't sink) sailed, the place to where Cunard and White Star moved their offices from Liverpool. In the 1980s the dock was transformed into 'Ocean Village', a combined marina, business park and leisure complex. The name itself implies what was supposed to happen to this area of the city. I tend to think that a place which builds something like the South Western Hotel, or Wyndham Court, or even the 1930s Civic Centre, is not a village, nor even a town, but a city. Evidently the City Council disagreed. The Art Deco Ocean Terminal was flattened to build Ocean Village, and the most recent building here is a car park in neo-deco style, as if in some kind of act of repentance. Surrounding it are the local bank HQs, all designed in a business-park style that is a fine reminder of why the period between the late 1970s and the 1990s is currently as much loathed by architectural fashion as the 1940s to 1960s period was previously, aside from mere knee-jerk reaction. What is so depressing about this place is the way that the formal return of decoration, and the use of traditional materials and pitched roofs that was then called 'vernacular', is paralleled by an alienating, anti-pedestrian approach to planning inherited from Modernism's





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worst aspects. It is basically a series of surface car parks with buildings in between, rather than vice versa. All the jollity, the stained glass, the patterns and the pediments appear as pathetic attempts to distract the driver or pedestrian from the alienating newness of the landscape. I do have some good memories of this place in its form as a leisure complex, I'll admit, and I find the Postmodernism of spectacle and geegaws somewhat preferable to that of vernacular, of Poundbury and woolly recreations of an imagined past—the Trocadero over New Urbanism.

The sole surviving dock building here used to lead into 'Canute's Pavilion', a tacky mirror-glass mall which featured such joys as a humorous T-shirt shop, Edwardian arcade games and ice cream parlours. It also had a shop which sold nautical tat of various sorts, including a piece of coral onto which I fell as a child, gashing my arm and bleeding all over the ornaments for sale. Later, in the mid 1990s, the city council sponsored the building of an art house cinema, the Harbour Lights. It was a visual triumph, a dynamic little building that is quite possibly the only thing of any architectural worth built here between 1969 and 2009, and which made life here as a teenager much better than it would otherwise have been. After only around fifteen years of existence, Canute's Pavilion was demolished. In its place is one of the few attempts here at the Urban Renaissance manner: two blocks, restaurants on the ground floor, three more shelved by the recession but masked by the ads, big meaningless bit of Public Art (a stern! Who knew?) in the middle, and preservation of the disused public transport tracks as ornaments.

The pornography of property is plastered across the building site. What sort of luxury is this, which seems predicated on the occupants of the flats being so permanently exhausted by their work that they need be infantilized, that they need to relax and be *indulged* in these secluded, ostentatiously calm places? Not to mention the question of what sort of luxury involves such minuscule proportions and such mean materials. Yet compared with the woeful vernacular architecture of the rest of the marina, I have to confess to feeling thankful that this at least resembles city





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Property propaganda, Ocean Village

architecture, and admit to preferring that central Southampton resemble aspirational, yuppified Leeds or Manchester than upper-crust Havant or Bursledon. This is one of the few ways in which Blairism is marginally, if almost imperceptibly preferable to its more straightforward precursor, Thatcherism. There is, however, no sense here of the freedoms of a city, while the marketing, based on exclusivity and seclusion, implies that these are suburbs in the guise of inner cities, as Jonathan Meades claims. That even the Urban Renaissance redesign of Ocean Village won't stick in somewhere as doggedly suburban as south-east England is indicated by the unfinished nature of this already cheap project. But Southampton's hold on urbanity is light, indefinite. It is liable to crumble at a touch.

Western Dock

The port is divided into leisure and utility. On the one hand you have the cruise ships, on the other containers, with nothing much (save the Isle of Wight ferry) between luxury and automation. I flick through the local *Daily Echo* and find that soon Southampton will briefly be home to the gargantuan Celebrity Eclipse, 'a twenty-first century, 122,000-ton engineering marvel'—built of course in Germany rather than the defunct Soton shipyards and





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boasting, among other features, a golf course on its roof. Another cruise ship, in port on the day we took some of these pictures, apparently features a dining room where the tables and chairs are made from ice—you are recommended to wear warm clothing. These floating Dubais, placeless and opulent, transport the cruiser through (literally) nowhere. The other sort of ship is attended to largely by the ‘robots’, colossal semi-automated cranes, with their additional skeleton crew of bored humans.

You can see the cranes in the distance from Mayflower Park, a windswept public space laid out in the 1960s by the City Architects’ Department that is (officially) the only publicly accessible stretch of the harbour. Pre-financial crisis, it was the mooted location for Avery Associates’ Spitfire Wing, an observation tower intended to mimic the aerodynamic form of the plane designed in the city, the only proposal for the waterfront to conjure the ‘Bilbao Effect’—or as the *Echo* calls it, ‘the wow factor’—though it seemed a fairly transparent attempt at one-upmanship with Portsmouth’s Spinnaker Tower. An article in the same paper in October 2008 claimed that it had been replaced by the ‘woe factor’, as almost all the new projects that had been announced or had received planning permission were cancelled or shelved. Since then, a couple have limped their way to completion, presumably representing ‘green shoots’. In response to all this, Tory



Mayflower Park





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council leader Royston Smith commented that ‘Southampton’s golden age will just have to be put back a couple of years’.¹⁵ In Mayflower Park, the wait for the golden age entails the no doubt temporary survival of some strange and beautiful artefacts—two shelters by Leon Berger in rubble stone with jagged concrete roofs, a tribute to Frank Lloyd Wright, which seem an efficient shelter for the cider-drinking youth that gather there.

My dad often took me, my brother and sister to Mayflower Park, to enjoy its now demolished playground, which included a concrete maze, aptly enough. Being a child of the eighties I was fairly obsessed with robots, specifically *Transformers*. Mum likes to tell the story about me coming home from nursery school claiming we’d been told about ‘this robot called God’ (well, how else to explain it?), and on Mayflower Park I would dream of robots in disguise. I was missing a trick, as they were a few yards from the park, in the containerized Western Dock. This vast dock complex was built in the 1930s on reclaimed land, to take the ever-more ginormous cruise ships of the era such as the Queen Mary. In the 1980s its vastness meant that, unlike Liverpool or London, it could accommodate containerization with ease. It’s also damn hard to see, at least from the Southampton side of the River Test, because you’re not *meant* to see it. It’s an incredible sight, but it’s never going to be on Southampton City Council’s Heritage



Ships seen from Mayflower Park





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itinerary—and unless you have a pass, you won't ever see it up close. The cranes induce the morbid thrill of seeing our replacements.

The difficulty in seeing the port should not surprise overmuch, as for all the drastic changes in port cities over the last few decades, docks were always heavily guarded places. The London Docks used to have a gigantic wall to keep out those not on business, a barrier which now exists in a less tangible form in the financial district of Docklands. In Southampton the exclusion is yet more subtle in that although the docks seem to have little effect on the town, they still exist, and are (or rather were until the crash) thriving. I went to the city's main comprehensive school, and *nobody* I knew had parents who worked on the docks. More often, their parents' jobs derived from the service industry in the centre, or from the Russell Group university in the suburban north. Yet beginning at the centre of town and straggling its way along the inner-city district of Freemantle, past Millbrook and ending at the edge of the New Forest, is the major cruise port and the second largest container port in Britain. Its success, size and centrality are matched only by its invisibility.

There are few places where you can gain any sense of it, let alone at its full scale, unless you're lucky enough to have a tower-block flat in Millbrook, Shirley or Redbridge. You could look from the other side of Southampton Water (I've never done so—there be dragons) or, more interestingly, there is a bridge and a pathway which begins at Millbrook Railway Station. This is itself a strange remnant, one of those stations which receive about one train an hour that miraculously survived the Beeching Axe. Were you walking from my Mum's house in Freemantle, you could see the container port start to rise above the terraces and flats, its arcing cranes softened by the winter light. The cruel scale and drama of the cranes make everything around seem petty.

As you walk through Freemantle towards the docks, past the recently closed British American Tobacco Factory, they loom incongruously above the terraces, steel arms hovering derisively over Salt & Battery Fish & Chips. The disassociation of industry





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and architecture after Modernism is spectacularly visible along the Western Docks, as most of the architecture built after the container port was established in 1969 is in the vernacular. Looking out onto the industrial cyber-architecture of the port, the flats and houses are utterly absurd, architecture placing its hands over its ears and eyes. Nothing has even attempted to exploit the drama of this place, which is again unsurprising, I suppose, as container ports are not seen as part of the city itself. Mostly they stand in out-of-the-way places like Felixstowe or Tilbury, rather than near the centre of medieval cities. So, there is only one way. You climb up the frighteningly unstable-seeming motorway bridge which leads to Millbrook station, and from here, equipped with zoom lens and/or binoculars, the port reveals itself at nearly its full extent. The neglect of the place is clear enough from the foliage that has draped itself around the concrete and steel of the station bridges, a mutant nature which is particularly virulent round here.

Walter Benjamin differentiated Communist Constructivist aesthetics from Fascist Futurist aestheticism by pointing out that the latter were merely interested in the *look* of technology, and had little interest in finding out how it worked, in mastering and applying it—it was instead a subject for a kind of technological nature painting. I don't know how this port complex works, but I find it almost convulsively beautiful. Although my intent here is to



DP World Southampton, from Millbrook Station





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examine what happens to a place when something like this is in its midst, it is important to work out how the port functions, to explain the networks of trade and power that keep it going. Here I can offer some minimal information, but not much else. Southampton Container Port is officially known as ‘DP World Southampton’. It is 51 per cent owned by DP World, which is itself owned by Dubai World, the insolvent state-run conglomerate. The other 49 per cent is owned by Associated British Ports, denationalized in the early 1980s and now largely owned by Goldman Sachs. That these institutions would have little interest in Southampton itself is again deeply unsurprising. Dubai World rationalized the port still further throughout the 2000s, introducing more automation and decimating the already tiny workforce. Their unimportance to the operation can be gleaned from the several industrial accidents at the container port over the last couple of years. In July 2009 one worker’s legs were crushed by a crane, and in March 2010 a 200ft crane collapsed, narrowly avoiding claiming any further victims.¹⁶



Rather than being introduced in one confrontational Thatcherite stroke, containerization and the destruction of Southampton dock labour was gradual, until after a few decades robots practically outnumbered dockers. How to respond to these cranes, then—these complex, almost autonomous creatures, operated (or not) by something fleshy in their interior? How could we possibly have fought them? They promise a true liberation from work, one of the most visible pieces of evidence for the genuine possibility of an automated labour replacing us and letting us fish in the afternoon, philosophize in the evening and so forth. Yet instead servile service industry work replicated—needlessly, pointlessly—the old structure of forty hours (plus) a week and a pay cheque, this time with fewer rights, less bargaining power. How could *we* have used the robots?

We might at least have done something more interesting with them than this. The port transports cars, it transports consumer goods manufactured in the Special Economic Zones of the People’s Republic of China, and it piles up waste and scrap;



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the literal embodiment of an overwhelming sense of waste, both political and actual. The port is one of the main importers of cars into the UK, and it transports some of the few made here out of the country—the Ford Transit, made in the north of the city in a factory threatened with closure throughout 2009, and whose workers took industrial action in sympathy with the Visteon–Ford occupiers in Enfield and Ireland. These views of the car port half empty may be a portent of the obsolescence of that particular form of locomotion, which looks rather antiquated when seen as a component part of this triumph of blank, rectilinear automation—the freight trains seem to slot into it far more neatly. But we cheated here by taking photographs soon after Christmas 2009, in what was no doubt a fallow period even by the standards of the deepest recession in British history. Assembled together according to type, they looked surreal, Lilliputian: three red cars all in a line, waiting to be transported around the country.

Walking down the steps of Millbrook Station’s railway bridge brings you to the passageway. It’s incredibly thin and overgrown, and it continues for around a mile to the Central Station. This pathway has at one side the motorway which runs alongside the port, on the other the railway line, so it is bordered on each side by metal fences, topped with barbed wire on the port side. The view of the cruise ship *Oriana*, through the barbed wire or otherwise,



The *Oriana*





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Cars at the container port

exemplifies how Southampton works rather neatly, with hidden, untouchable luxury amidst general meanness. The Oriana was built in Germany by P&O in the mid 1990s. Apparently, the original intention was to build it in the UK but no shipyard capable of such a feat survives ... There's something rather comic about the contrast between the sleek Corbusian melodrama of a cruise ship and the self-effacing container ships. In the former, superfluous luxury is massive and bombastic; in the latter, a vast amount of consumer cargo is contained in a seemingly small, undramatic space. The path is not blocked off, so in principle this is a public



Modern warfare





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right of way, and I've seen other people walking it—but there are pylons in its midst, which you could touch, were you to throw caution to the wind. Like everything else here, greenery takes over as much as it possibly can, creeping up the pylons themselves. Nearby, crows and robins are irritated to have their calm disturbed. *Call of Duty – Modern Warfare 2* is advertised across the road, and modern warriors depart for Iraq and Afghanistan from Marchwood, over Southampton Water.

In fact, this path used to be parkland, a green hinterland created between the 1930s docks and the Victorian housing, which implies that once this was considered a spectacle worth seeing. Halfway along the path the passageway is traversed by the motorway, in the form of a tight, oblique-angled overpass, leaving a triangular sheltered space. This space has some kind of lake inside it, a puddle deep enough to make it enormously unpleasant if one is not wearing wellingtons, as the mud and vague, indeterminate pollution coalesce into a viscous, soupy gloop. But here there is evidence that this passageway is enormously prized, at least by some—a series of planks have been laid across it, forming a precarious but usable bridge, as tentative and partial as the concrete bridge above it is solid and certain.



Outlaws Cru





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Messages of some sort or another

The reason for all of this soon becomes clear. It has become a canvas for Southampton's graffiti artists. Tagging usually seems a drab micro-egotism, cliquey territorial pissing never aimed at the buildings that really deserve it—but here they've done something spectacular. Not by recourse to Banksy-style 'subversion', but seemingly from being in a secluded (though for the passing trains, extremely prominent) space, obscure enough and far enough from surveillance to be able to work on tags long enough to render them as lurid, jagged works of temporary art, blaring purples, greens and oranges. Dazzle painting.

It's magnificent, exhilarating, and the only aesthetic response of any sort to the area's extreme modernity—but like the cranes and containers it can't be enjoyed unambiguously. Each is a weird combination of glaringly visible and hermetic, neither really wants to communicate anything much, and both are expressions of disconnection, of adjacent places appearing to be in different worlds. It's a chaos of illegibility (which is no doubt dense with reference to the thirty or so people in the know), shout-outs to places in Lithuania and obscure portraits—and caveats aside, it's wonderful. At the head of it all are the words, clear this time, 'THE OUTLAWS CRU'. Big up The Outlaws Cru, whoever you are.



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Boxes on boxes

Then another bridge, this time a rickety 1930s construction which once led from Freemantle to the docks, but now takes the lost pedestrian back to civilization of a sort. Around here you find bits of discarded clothing, and on the steps of the bridge, the single word 'HELP'. The signs of life are horribly unnerving. A pair of women's trousers, impaled on the spiked fences. A pair of unmatching shoes. They look like fragments from a rape, clues to a murder, something only accentuated by the sight of the containers just behind the trees. It can't get much more sinister than this, and accordingly the passageway opens out and begins to resemble somewhere you could walk a dog without being dumped in the bushes, or without worrying about encountering strange temporal phenomena. Here, the container port's cranes are no longer so visible, and the containers themselves take over—pile after pile after pile of them. Through the undergrowth a sign says 'City', and then the familiar city I know and love/hate comes into view—the ribbed-concrete tower of HSBC, the Brutalist stern of Wyndham Court, the clock tower of the Civic Centre on one side, and on the other the postmodernist horror show of the 'Pirelli site'.



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Shedscape

Southampton presents itself as a puzzle. Every time I go back I ask myself, ‘How did this happen?’ How did this city, by all accounts once the undisputed regional capital, get to the point where an entire stretch of its centre, as large as a small town, was given over to a gigantic retail park? How is it that this, the sixteenth largest city in the country, has the third highest level of violent crime and the third worst exam results, despite being at the centre of one of the country’s most affluent counties? And does any of this have anything to do with the fact that the city contains what was, when built, the largest urban mall in Britain?

In simple policy terms, these questions are easy enough to answer, and were extensively discussed by George Monbiot in *Captive State*. A large industrial site on reclaimed land became ‘open for development’ in the 1990s. The Labour council decided to designate it as a retail area at the same time as the rival inner-city retail centre of St Mary’s was ‘regenerated’ out of recognition, its shops demolished and its covered market torn down, leaving little more than a scattering of introverted student flats (in the vernacular, naturally). As this site was already easily accessed from the M27, the result is that the extremely affluent surrounding areas can get into the shopping malls easily and quickly, where they will



Mountbatten Retail Park





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find abundant parking space. Jobs For Local People are no doubt the stated aim, and the alibi for extremely profitable land deals. The result is a city devoid of any palpable civic pride, with a series of chain pubs where shops used to be, competing to sell the cheapest pints. I know how and why this all happened, but there's more to this city, elements to it which suggest different things could have happened and indeed could still do so.

Leaving the deeply unprepossessing Southampton Central Station on its southern entrance, you can see the containers already, next to the grimy sheds of the Mountbatten Retail Park. The most immediately noticeable urban artefacts are the hotels. Hotels are, in my experience, the most reliably awful examples of British architecture built in the last thirty years, closely followed by the similar typology of Halls of Residence. Is this to do with some kind of national aversion to the concept of hospitality? Do their developers worry that architecture might deter custom? Or are they just unbelievably tight-fisted? This particular cluster of hotels was lucky enough to receive a specific denunciation from the hilarious, depressing weblog *Bad British Architecture*—a Novotel and an Ibis, similarly lumpen and blocky, aptly described by the blog's writer the 'Ghost of Nairn' as 'simply incompetent building, let alone design'. Its astounding crapness makes you wonder if there is a deliberate policy of discouraging cruise passengers from actually staying in the city. Across the road from them a Police Operational Command Unit is being erected to designs by multinational giants of shit Broadway Malyan. The site currently consists of a concrete frame and some brickwork, presumably to be In Keeping with something or other. There's an onsite Christmas tree. This seasonal jollity is not continued by the police advertisements outside the station itself, which are all, rather staggeringly, about knives and knife crime, presenting those driving in from the M27 with another reason to avoid venturing any further than the malls.

The major dockside building is the Solent Flour Mills, which, remarkably enough, is still working. Equally remarkably, there have to my knowledge been no proposals to turn it into a lottery-





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Solent Flour Mills

funded art gallery. It's absolutely huge, and of course inaccessible to the public. The dock gates were built around the same time in the early 1930s. The clocks have all had their hands removed. The most salient thing about industrial architecture after Fordism, the old form of industrial organization based on centralization, high wages, collective bargaining and intensive, linear mass production, is the changeover from an architecture of light to an architecture of windowless enclosure. The Solent Mills are a fine example of a Fordist 'daylight factory', notable as much for expanses of glass as for expanses of brick. Conversely, post-



Ford showrooms, Shirley



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Fordist industry (there *is* such a thing—the presumption that post-Fordist automatically equals post-industrial is seldom correct) is marked by sheds without glass, where the ideology of transparency is transferred to financial capital and its shiny office blocks. Even Ford's own Transit works in the suburbs are windowless, a 1990s steel box looming over the top-lit earlier factory buildings. The de-industrialization of Southampton (which happened in train with the intensified automation of the container port) means that there are few windowless industrial sheds in the centre of town. There are, however, windowless leisure sheds.

The biggest of these is Leisure World, an 'adaptive reuse' of a former automated warehouse that in the late 1990s was transformed into a gigantic shed of entertainment: nightclubs, chain restaurants, and a multiplex, with lots and lots of car parking. The entrance is framed on one side by a casino, one of several in the centre, presumably intended for the cruise passengers; and on the other by 'Quayside', a simulacrum Victorian pub for an area which was under water in the Victorian era. The car park of Leisure World is one of the few places where certain of the dock's architectural features reveal themselves—the cyclopean scale of the Flour Mills, for one, and for another, the pathetic tin canopy of the City Cruise Terminal. I spent much time walking round



Leisure World



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Quayside Pub

said car park with a camera, where I saw among other things that the nightclubs—formerly Ikon and Diva—are now called ‘Reykjavik Icehouse’ and ‘New York Disco’, perhaps in some partial memory of the thousands of New Yorkers who passed through this city in the first half of the last century. You will note the lack of photographs of any of these things. As I take a picture of the wavy roof of Ikea from behind the Leisure Container, a voice from behind me says ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ I get out



Castle House vs the De Vere



my NUJ Press Pass, which says on the back that the Police Federation recognizes me as a 'bona fide news gatherer'. 'That's nice,' he says when I get out the card. 'But have you got permission?' 'What, to take photos in a car park?' 'This is private property. You have to have permission.' He then makes me delete the photographs I took in the car park from the digital camera, one by one, before I am allowed out onto the 'street'.

Except there is no street here. This whole gigantic site is designed solely for the car, so my being a pedestrian is already suspicious, impeccably white and well-spoken though I may be. There are two recent buildings as part of this spreading mass of shed: one for Ikea, which includes some public art on the wooden spirals of its car park; and another for cruise operator Carnival, which, with its high-tech cribbings, is almost a work of architecture, although not a work of *urban* architecture—it's another business park building that is, somehow, literally yards from a medieval walled town. Similarly un-shed-like is the 1994 De Vere Grand Harbour Hotel ('a shit-brown postmodern Brunswick Centre with a big glass pyramid fucked into it', says *Bad British Architecture*, marvellously¹⁷). I've long thought this a risible, ridiculous building, but somehow in the context of blank, deathly sheds it seems to have at least some ambition, some statement of place and clumsy grandeur—and surely better a failed, ridiculous grandiosity than the utterly grim utilitarianism of the other city hotels. Behind the De Vere is a different conception of civic grandiosity, Eric Lyons's Castle House. Better known for his private housing, Lyons designed here a powerful council tower block, detailed precisely in stone, concrete and wood. On the last of the walks where these photos were taken, it was being reclad with green glass and UPVC, a material which on 3 July 2009 proved to be lethal in tower blocks at the Lakanal House fire in Camberwell. Regardless, it's the cheapest and easiest way to dress a tower, whether a former president of the RIBA designed it or not. The assumption seems to be that its original fabric is automatically worthless, irrespective of it being considered 'the finest tower in the south' as late as the 1980s.¹⁸

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WestQuay hinterland

But this is all really just leading up to Building Design Partnership's enormous WestQuay mega-mall, the main occupant of the former Pirelli site. I've often avoided it gingerly, taken routes that circumvent it. I don't like it, obviously, but the language that is used to attack it is remarkably similar to that which is used to attack some of the architecture I love. It's out of scale, it's too monumental, it's fortress-like, it's Not In Keeping, it leads to abrupt and shocking contrasts, it's too clean and too shiny . . . well, yes. At one point it bridges the street, next to a line of Regency Terraces, and is full of arch contempt for that which precedes it, irrespective of an attempt to 'respond' to the terrace's scale through an industrial, lightly brick-clad wall, with storage ever so slightly legible as its function. The shopping mall has a suppressed dreamlife, from the socialist politics of its 'inventor', the Viennese architect Victor Gruen, to Walter Benjamin's conception of the shopping arcade as the house of the dreaming collective. BDP, the architects of this and many, many other recent British buildings, have their own socialist past. They began as a co-operative founded by George Grenfell Baines, an architect of Lancastrian working-class extraction, to unite architects, engineers, sociologists, in a non-hierarchical Partnership which could sidestep the hoary old myth of the autonomous architect (that they became a normal private company in 1997, of all years, seems apt). The mall



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derives from an attempt to recreate social spaces, to become a socialist-inflected social condenser in the context of consumer capitalism. If we condemn the malls without being very careful about how we go about it, we line up with the likes of Paul Kingsnorth, those who care more for the destruction of village shops than the collapse of industrial civilization.

I still hate it. Some of my friends helped build it, you know. Indulging in a bit of manual labour to save up money for their gap years. The first time I ever went to WestQuay I was shocked by it, not least because of the fact it coincided with the destruction of St Mary's Street—and in their Waterstone's I found a copy of the Monbiot book which has a chapter on this very topic. I read the entire chapter in there as a minor, piffling protest. Before WestQuay there was Colonel Seifert's Arundel Towers—two office blocks surmounting a car park, a slide of which I have been known to use as illustration in discussion of the destruction of modernism in Britain. I remember it faintly; the strangeness and intrigue of its multiple levels and the Dog and Duck pub more than the twin towers. The break with Arundel Towers' approach to urbanism was hardly total.

In terms of how it interacts with the landscape, WestQuay is as aggressive and forthright as any 1960s public building. It incorporates a deep slope, multiple levels and entry points, and two major walkways bridging the roads that the developers couldn't obliterate. Unlike some of its postwar precursors, such as Castle Market in Sheffield (of which more later), there's no pleasure for the walker in traversing all these different ways of getting from A to B. This isn't merely because the earlier building is picturesquely lived-in and dilapidated, but because it's not seamless: you feel the movement from one place to another, you are able to enjoy it in some manner, and the spaces contain places where you could stop and think rather than be induced to consume at every possible moment. But it is a remarkably complex building, including within itself a deceptively small street façade to Above Bar, the high street it destroyed, a glazed viewing area as part of the food court, and a John Lewis store reached via (internal, hardly





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WestQuay car parks

palpable) walkways. Inside is what the mall's website describes as a 'focal point', a descendant of Gruen's 'social' spaces, where the lifts and escalators are all clustered, giving a frictionless impression of constant movement. The gestures at contextualism are present, correct and pathetic. At the end which faces the Medieval Walls, the architects have given it a complimentary and functionless watchtower, and the shiny, plasticky cladding is infilled with rubble to be In Keeping (something which was also employed by Leon Berger in his tower blocks at St Mary's and Shirley). This rubble is mostly at ground-floor level, where it is part of sloping



WestQuay's social condenser





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walls, thick enough to withstand a blast or a ram-raid. It has a symbolic function quite aside from the pomo 'reference' to the medieval wall: to deter anyone who ought not to be here.

What makes it particularly malign is what happens at the back. Behind the walls and behind Above Bar is a large patch of wasteland¹⁹ and WestQuay's service areas, which take up a massive amount of urban space. They are made up mostly of multi-storey car parks, but also of the series of retail parks that accompanied the main mall—three of them, all themselves with attendant massive car parks. Needless to say, this is not a nice place to walk around. The entire area, a mile or more, is simply not for pedestrians. Although this might be expected on the Kentish hinterland of the M25, it bears repeating that this is right in the centre of a city, in an era when government white papers have endlessly rambled on about the walkable city. This centrality is part of its justification: it keeps people in the city. But the economy is exactly that of an out-of-town mall: reached by car, actively discouraging leaving the malls and venturing into the city around, uninterested in the possibilities of the city itself, and leaving the other side of town, the side that is not shopping mall, to rot. One upshot of this is the weekend violence along Above Bar, another is the continuing disintegration of St Mary's. But service industry jobs were indeed duly created.

WestQuay does *make an effort* in certain respects, and this effort makes it all the more tragic. You can promenade around it, as you can along the city walls. Yet there's a spectacular incoherence to it all. Each part seems disconnected to the other, aside from the wipe-clean white cladding, and it's never pulled together through any design idea of any sort because it's simply impossible to do so. You simply can't make a building like this into something legible unless the architects are exceptionally talented and/or conscientious (apologies to all at BDP for the implication that they may be neither). We can see here how over the last decade a Modernism of a sort has continued, not as a coherent ideology, an aesthetic or a formal language which embraces and intensifies the experience of modernity, but via the element of it lamented by





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Marchwood Incinerator

urbanists and sentimentalists since the 1920s. This is a landscape where the car is dominant, where the idea of streets, walking, any element of surprise, are comprehensively designed out. Conversely, the only way to rediscover some kind of element of excitement in these spaces is to walk around (not inside) them, precisely because the planning itself does not want you to. You see things. You don't see people, but you see intriguing *things*, some sort of autonomous logic of commerce almost without leavening or prettification. (I say almost because some of the car parks are made of brick, the vernacular of some language or other.) Like the Western docks, WestQuay is an inhuman space where capital no longer needs to present a human face, where it thinks nobody is looking.

What is appropriate about WestQuay, though, is the way in which it joins onto the container port almost imperceptibly. The roads in the Western Docks are called First, Second and Third Avenue. Follow them and you might reach the Millbrook Superbowl, where you can play that most American and blue-collar of sports, ten-pin bowling. Go back the other way along the approach to the M27, and the containers become an organizing principle. Stacks of containers full of goods on one side, stacks of containers full of people buying goods on the other, each in the form of coloured or corrugated boxes. The elegance of the





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principle is perfect and some enterprising post-Fordist is bound to combine the two sooner or later, completing the circle by transporting people in those boxes too, using them for transportation, shopping and living all at once. Sure, there are no windows in these things, but put in a few branches of Costa and nobody will complain. Then, untouched by human hands, the containers could be dropped in Dubai or Shenzhen, the cruise ships of the twenty-first century. Just across the water from this container city is a gigantic incinerator, designed by Jean-Robert Mazaud. A perfect dome, not Rogers's deflated tent, silvery steel, not Teflon. It turns rubbish into electricity, and it shines with sinister optimism.

