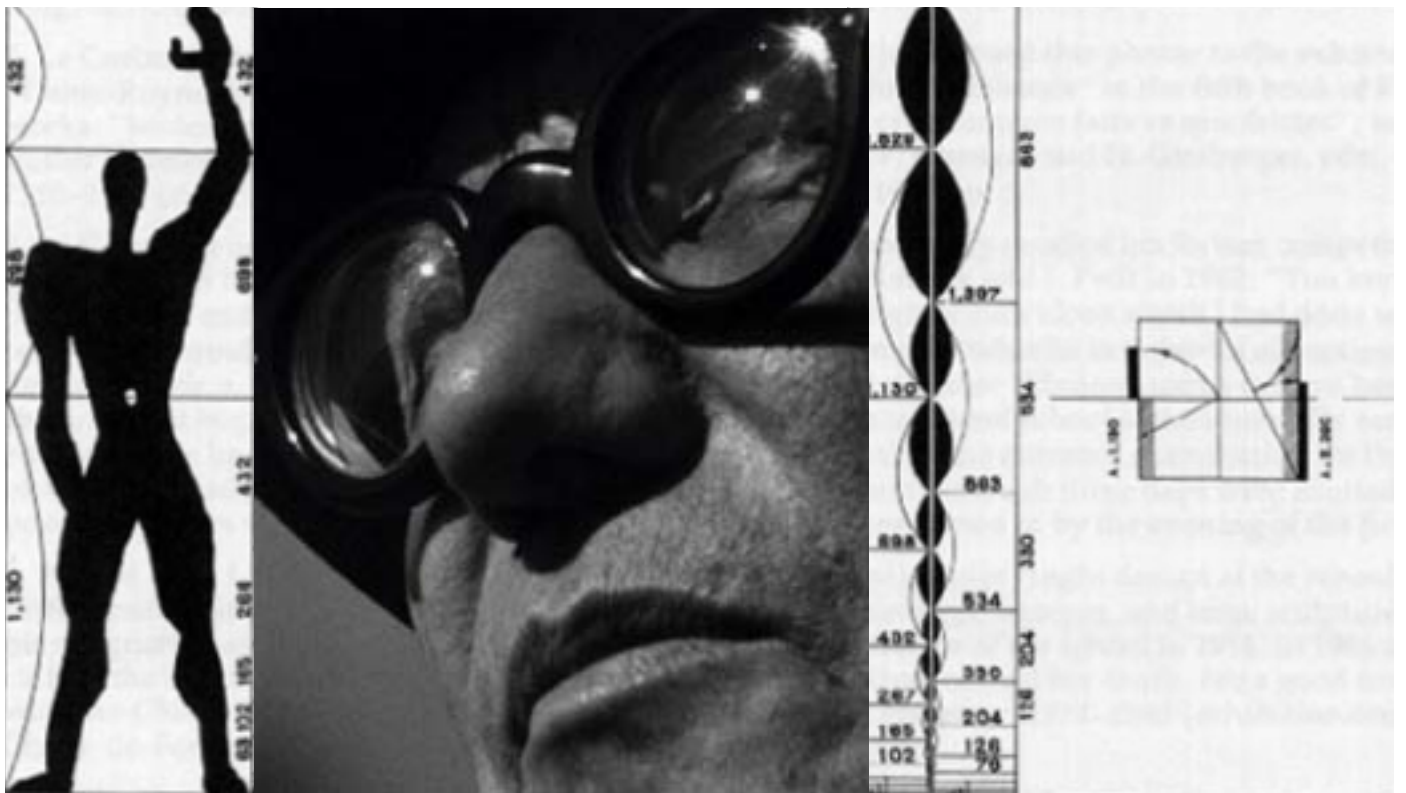


The Corbusian Legacy



David Rudlin - URBED and AOU

Presentation to made by David Rudlin to: Towards a new Urbanism: an International Symposium on the 21st Century City Liverpool, 25 – 27 November 2008

Manchester International cube

60s Modernist Architecture in Manchester

113-115 PORTLAND STREET MANCHESTER

11.05.01 - 04.07.01

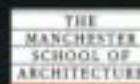
TUES - FRI 12-5 PM SAT-SUN 12-4 PM CLOSED MONDAYS

NEW EXHIBITION

curated by Graeme Russell

Manchester International

arts council signs & exhibitions



I wanted to start with one of my favorite exhibitions at the CUBE Gallery in Manchester. Back in 2001 Graeme Russell who curated the gallery commissioned an architectural photographer to photograph Manchester's 1960s buildings as if they had just been completed and were going to be published in AJ. The exhibition was fascinating and raised some interesting issues....

Response:

1. Buildings we have hated for so long are actually quite beautiful!



Response:

1. Buildings we have hated for so long are actually quite beautiful!
2. You start to get a sense of what they were trying to achieve.



Response:

1. Buildings we have hated for so long are actually quite beautiful!
2. You start to get a sense of what they were trying to achieve.
3. Hang on a sec. they look like a lot of the CGIs currently in the architecture mags.



Response:

1. Buildings we have hated for so long are actually quite beautiful!
2. You start to get a sense of what they were trying to achieve.
3. Hang on a sec. they look like a lot of the CGIs currently in the architecture mags.
4. Why are all the architects here raving about them?



The uneasy realisation dawned that the hated buildings of the 1960s are not so different from the buildings we are putting up today. How many contemporary buildings will look as good in 40 years time? How many of today's architects yearn for the heady days of the 1960s - when architects were architects and the city lay at their feet?

Question:

1. Can it be good architecture if it doesn't work?



This is Robin Hood Gardens - subject of a recent campaign by BD to have it listed. Many would say a building that has failed to do what it was built to do cannot be good architecture — yet it is. This wouldn't be an issue in other forms of art. A great modern painting or piece of music, almost by definition will not be universally accepted - if so it wouldn't be regarded as ground breaking or challenging. But is architecture art?

Question:

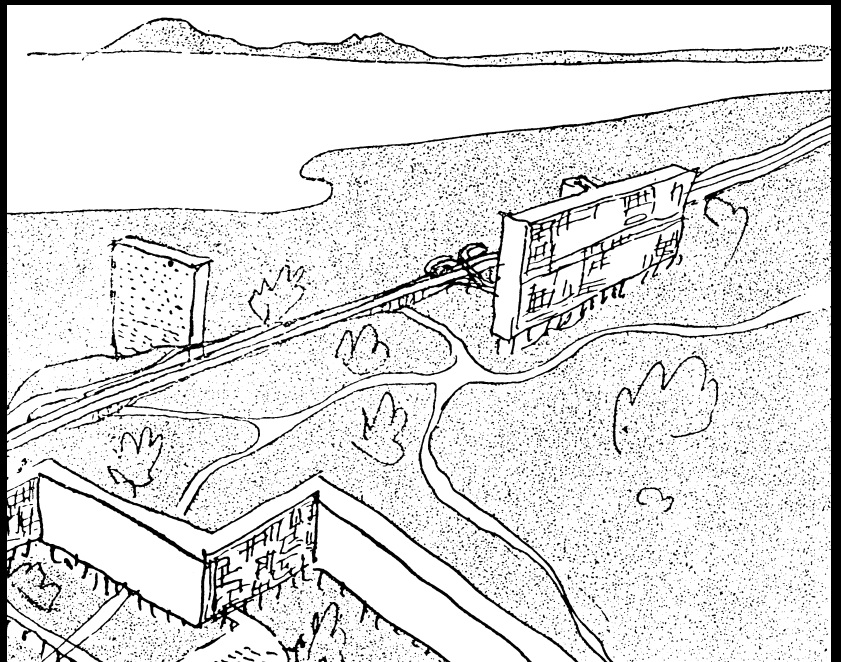
1. Can it be good architecture if it doesn't work?
2. Can it be good architecture if it is bad urbanism?



If not then we can write off most of the architecture of the last century!

“ The corridor street should be tolerated no longer, for it poisons the houses that border it ”

“ Café bars will no longer be the fungus that eats up the pavements of Paris ”



Le Corbusier

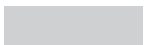
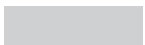
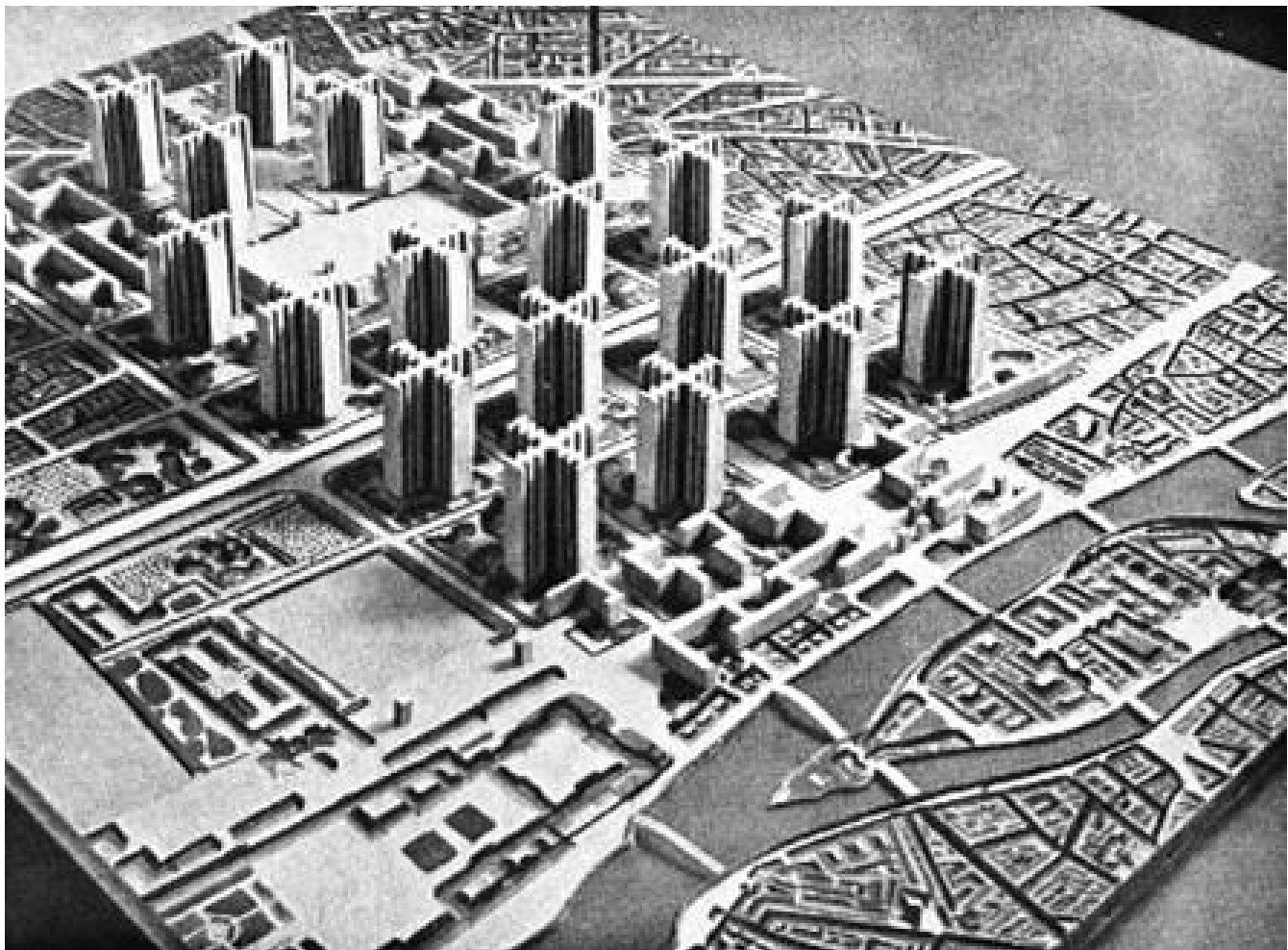
The first of my quotes that I will use today - from the great man himself who reveals himself not so much as someone who doesn't understand urbanism but who clearly sees it as the enemy.

This is the problem with Le Corbusier -
the architecture is extraordinary. . . .



The point is not that bad urbanism can be good architecture, but that the quality of the architecture makes us miss the damaging principles that it embodies. This is even more of a problem when the architecture is bastardised in lesser hands where it retains all the damaging principles without the inspiration and beauty.

But he didn't understand the first thing about urbanism. . .



“ 0 beautiful, for spacious
skies and amber waves of grain,
has there ever been another place
on earth where so many people of
wealth and power have paid for
and put up with so much architec-
ture they detested as within thy
blessed borders today



Tom Wolfe - 1981

The tendency today - as Tom Wolfe articulates, is to see the modern architects of the 60s and 70s as mad bad and misguided. This however is to miss the point. They certainly didn't lack talent and could almost certainly claim a stronger ideological base and sense of social responsibility than most of today's urban professionals.



The Bull Ring, Birmingham

13

It was not even the case that they pursued their ideals in the face of widespread public opposition. In the 1950s and 60s there was a general mood of optimism and modernism shared by politicians and the public alike. Last Christmas I was given Martin Parr's book of 'Boring Postcards' which of course are not boring at all. These capture the mood of the time - an era when people really did look after the flowers in the middle of the road. Just contrast the age of the cars in these postcards with the modernity of the buildings and you start to get a sense of how extraordinary they were at the time.



Smalbrook Ringway, Birmingham

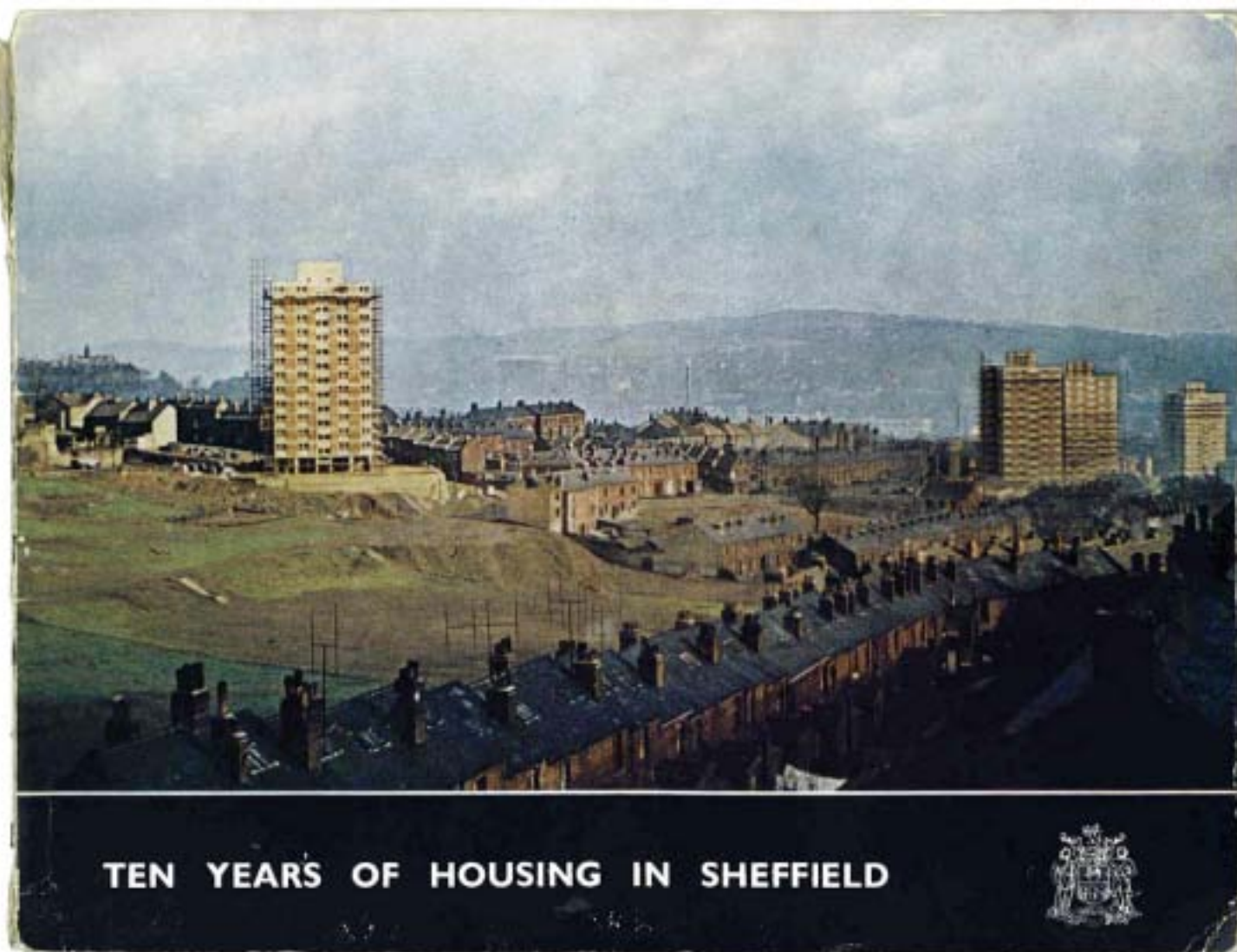


The New Bus Station, Preston (Largest in Britain).

P2423



Harlow New Town



17

This is not a postcard but the cover of a wonderful book on the work of Sheffield's housing department in 1959 - a monograph it would be called today - the cover shows the optimism of the 50s seeping away the dark damp terraces of the city.

“ There is no reason why the twenty storey mark should not be passed... as important a step in the construction of domestic dwellings as was the breaking of the sound

,”



Chair of Liverpool
Housing Committee
late 1950s

8

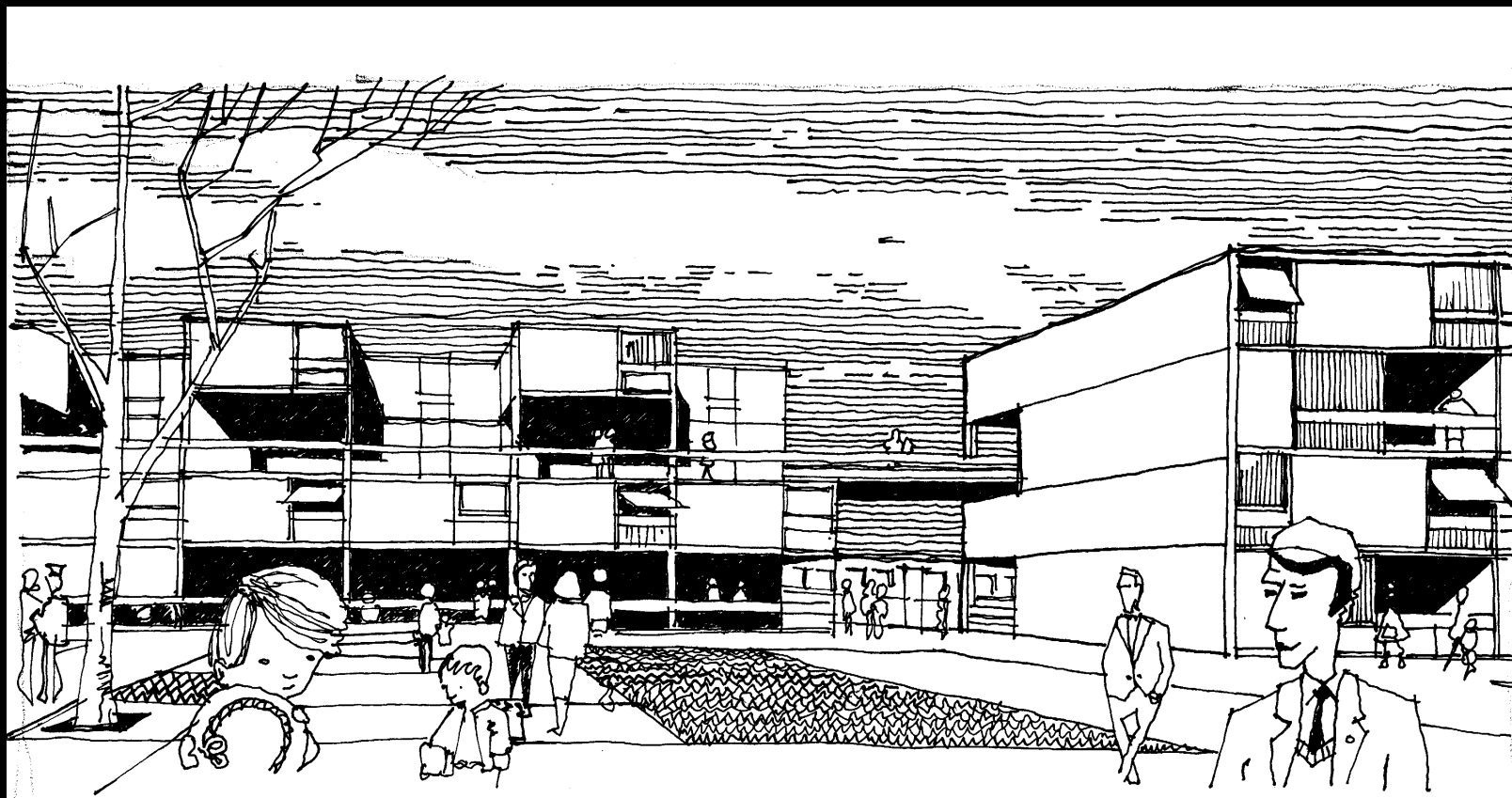
Here we come to the crunch point – for all the optimism, and despite the fact that the good councillor talks about ‘domestic dwellings’ it wasn’t the middle classes, as Corb envisaged, who ended up living in the bright new future.



Who grew up, like I did, in the 1960s? If you did this may look familiar....



It wasn't at all bizarre to have a children's series - Mary Mungo and Midge — that depicted a family living in a tower block where the sun always shined and no one ever urinated or left syringes in the lift.



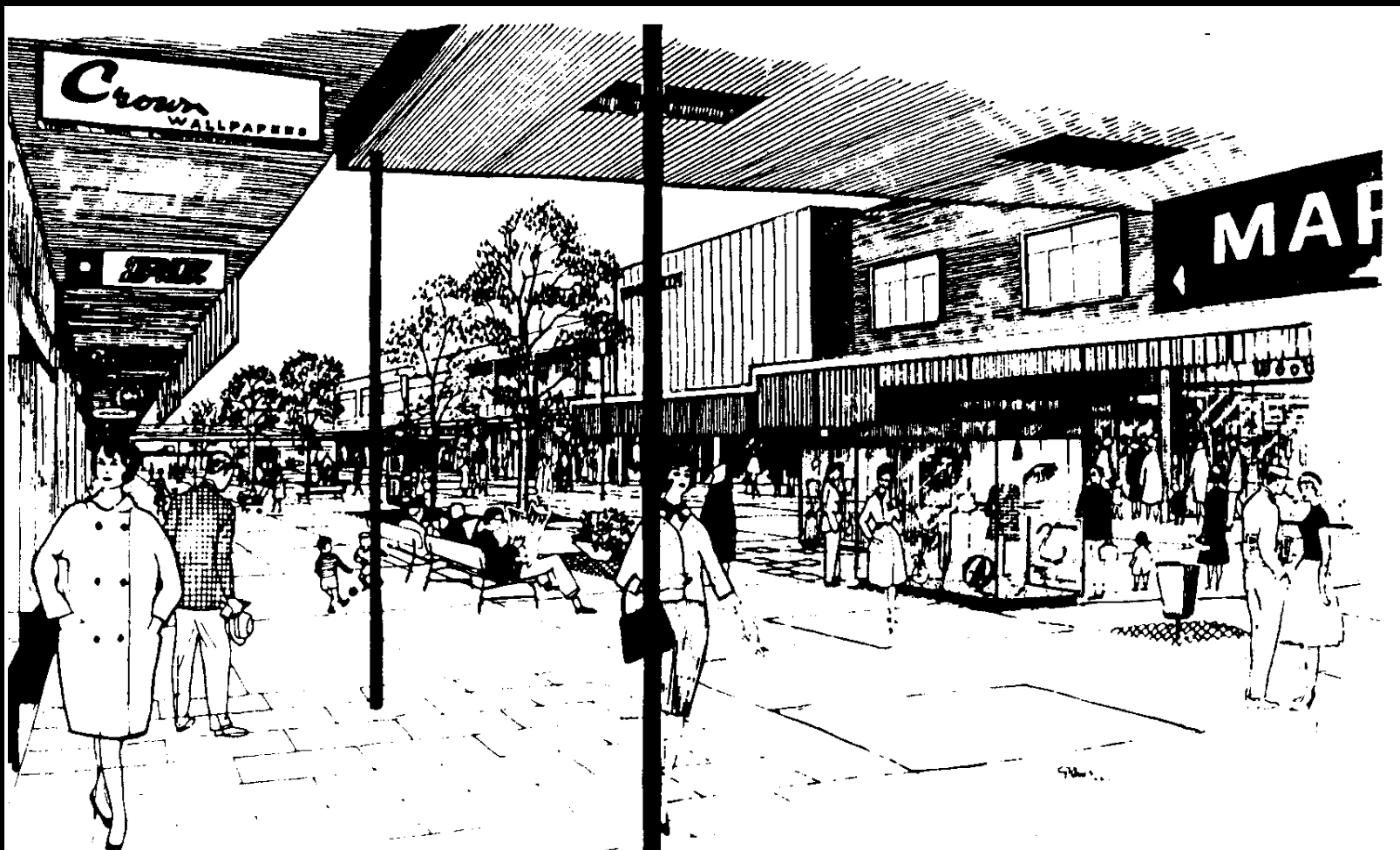
21

Here's Mary in Hulme, along with lots of other nice people wearing pencil skirts and ties.



22

Here she is in the car with her family driving through the cover of Buchanan's Traffic in Towns report.



23

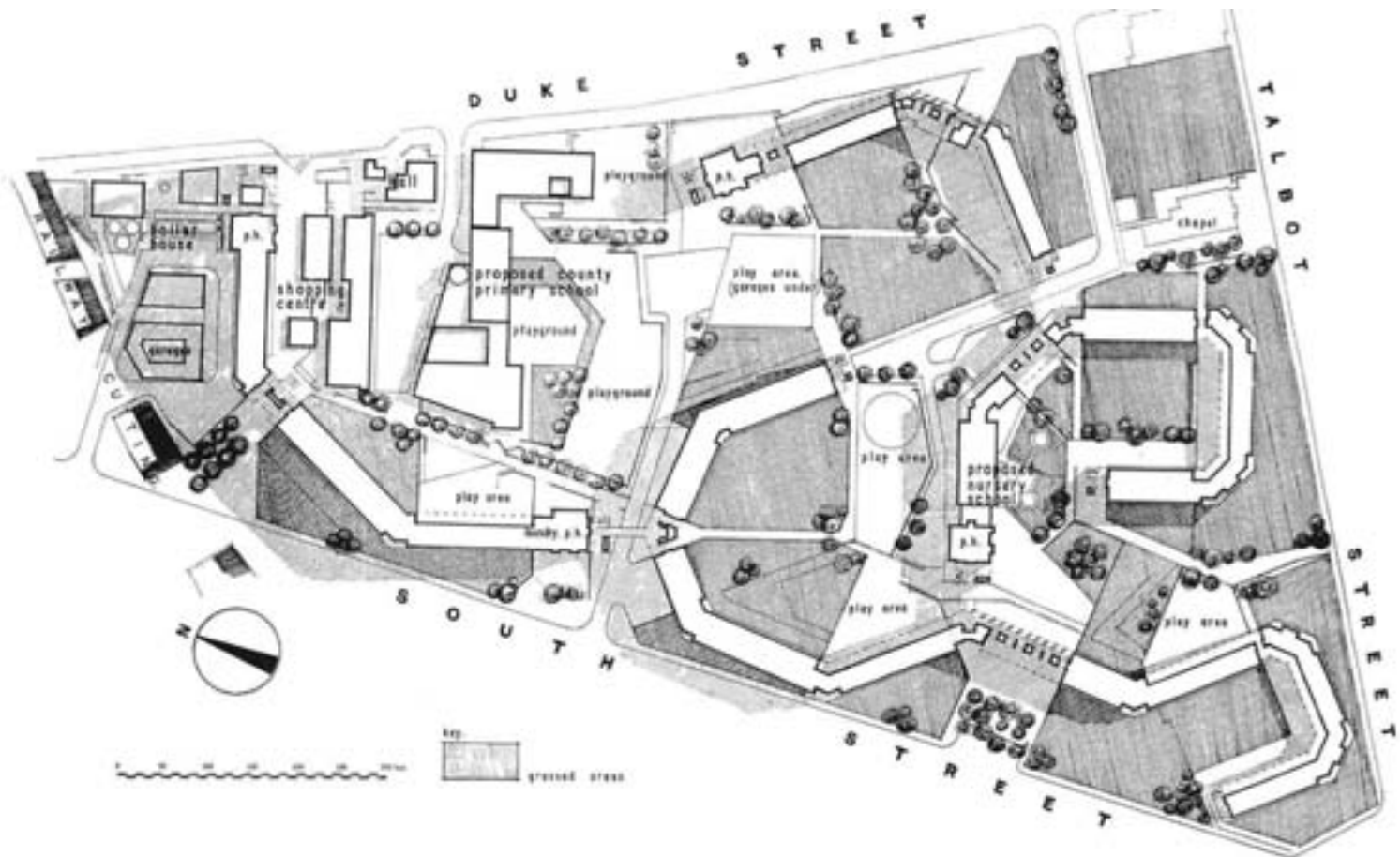
And there she is in the background in Bracknell Town centre, along with lots more pencil skirts.

“ The whole housing division
seemed like a giant nursery school
who's principle objective was the
happiness of the architects ,



Martin Richardson

Tower Block: Modern public
housing in England, 1994



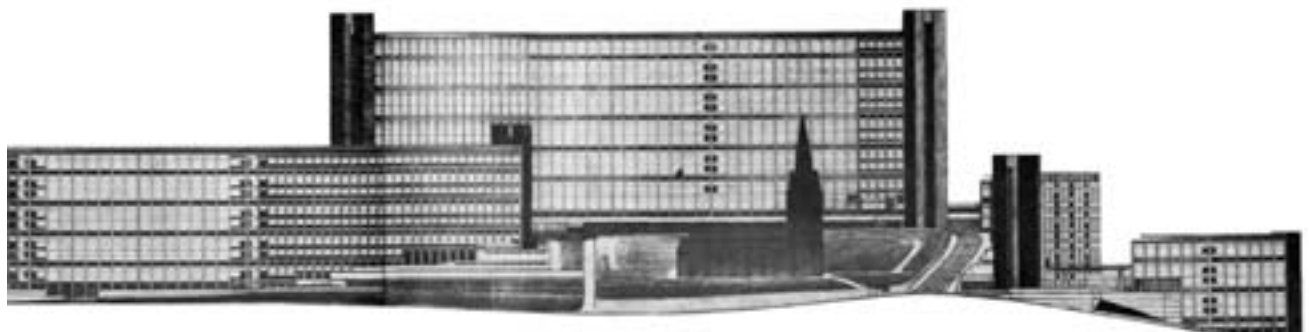
Layout of Park Hill—a pedestrian precinct with a continuous deck system within the buildings around the whole site. At ground level cul-de-sac roads serve shops, pubs and schools, the remainder of the ground being laid out as park space threaded with a system of footpaths.

Le tracé de Park Hill. Une enceinte pour piétons avec un système de pont continué à l'intérieur du bâtiment faisant le tour de tout l'emplacement. Au niveau du sol, des rues en cul de sac desservent les magasins, débits de boissons et écoles, le reste du terrain étant consacré à un parc sillonné par un système de trottoirs.

План Park Hill—пешеходный предел с непрерывной системой настилов внутри зданий вокруг всего местоположений. Нижнего этажа туники дорог обслуживают магазины, трактиры и школы, остальная земля выложена как парки, пересеченные системой тротуаров.

43

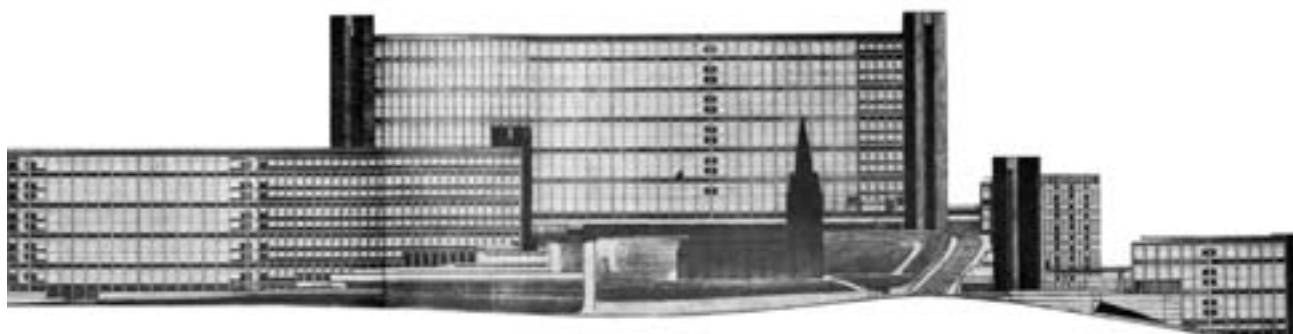
25



Which brings us back to 10 Years of housing in Sheffield, which, as you will see, was written published in English French and Russian! Last Nick Johnson was a little disparaging about Park Hill which was finished in 1959 and in my view is probably the finest UK example of modernist design on a large scale. The plan above is wonderful and the experience even today of walking along the walkways that alternate between the interior and exterior views as the ground falls away beneath you is breathtaking.



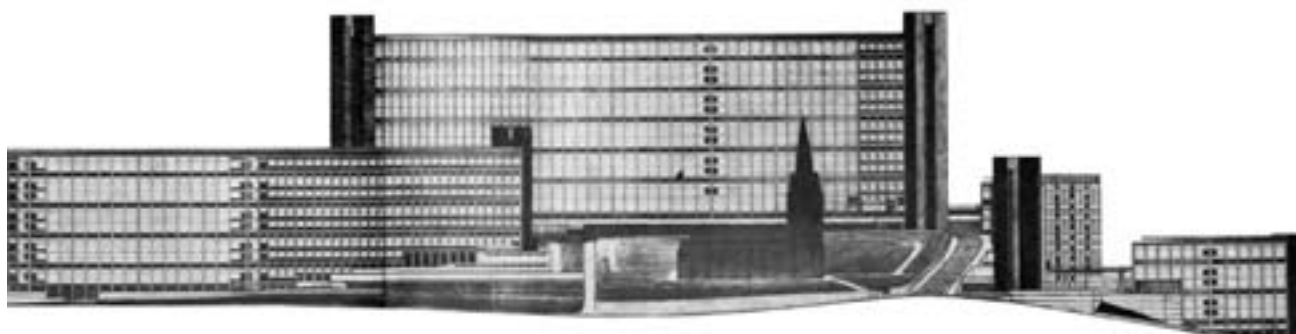
26



And like the optimistic views of the 1950s the early pictures of the estate suggest that initially at least it operated as intended.



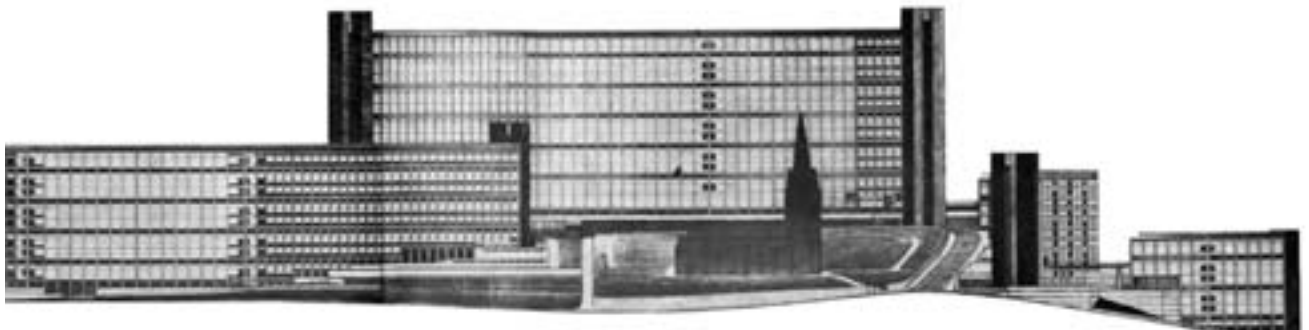
27



Even the streets in the sky.



28



But for how long? This is a good example of the problem - one of the great things about Park Hill is the arrangement of flats over three floors so that you need fewer walkways and can accommodate a huge range of flat sizes. The elevations are created from this arrangement. The problem however is that this means that the walkways have no windows - just doors, making them feel deserted and unsupervised (the photo on the previous page must have been posed!).



29

The result was a structure that was beautiful but failed in all respects as a piece of urbanism. No doubt once Egret West and Urban Splash have completed their work it will be even more wonderful and the flats will be popular I hope with people in Sheffield. But let us not allow this success to allow us to forget the mistakes that were made when these estates were built.

simplicity or complexity?



30

So what is the legacy of Corbusier?

1. A mistaken belief that cities can be simplified into a set of working parts like a machine and made to work more efficiently. The reality is that they are as complex as living organisms and any attempt to reduce this complexity risks losing the essence of what makes them work and certainly what makes them special.

evolution or revolution?



31

So what is the legacy of Corbusier?

2. A mistaken belief that radical surgery is required to reconfigure urban areas. Knock them down and start again rather than evolving and working with the complex reality of what is there today.

architect as hero?



32

So what is the legacy of Corbusier?

3. A mistaken belief that all you really need to solve any problem is a good architect. This remains an assumption today and was certainly behind much of the thinking in the Urban Task Force report. Architects unfortunately are often the last people to understand urbanism and much 'good architecture' fails to understand what makes a good city.

architecture as ideology?



33

So what is the legacy of Corbusier?

4. A mistaken belief that you are not supposed to say any of this! Modernism is progressive, traditional architecture is reactionary and right wing. Arguments about modernism and its legacy are therefore primarily political rather than aesthetic.

Ornament and crime... The man of
our time who smears the walls with
erotic symbols is a delinquent and
a degenerate.



Adolf Loos 1908

architecture as art?



35

So what is the legacy of Corbusier?

5. Architecture has become one of the arts - fine for a house commissioned by a connoisseur, or even for a church or a museum. Less so for a social housing estate.

modernism v urbanism?



36

So what is the legacy of Corbusier?

6. Personally I love the modernist aesthetic but deplore modernist attempts to plan urban areas. In the US the two have been lumped together and in a flight from modernism of all kinds the US New Urbanist movement has become associated with faux traditional architecture. The danger is that this become seen as a style like post modernism, rather than a fundamental set of principles. If this happens will be overturned by the next generation because that's what the next generation always does to the styles of its predecessors.

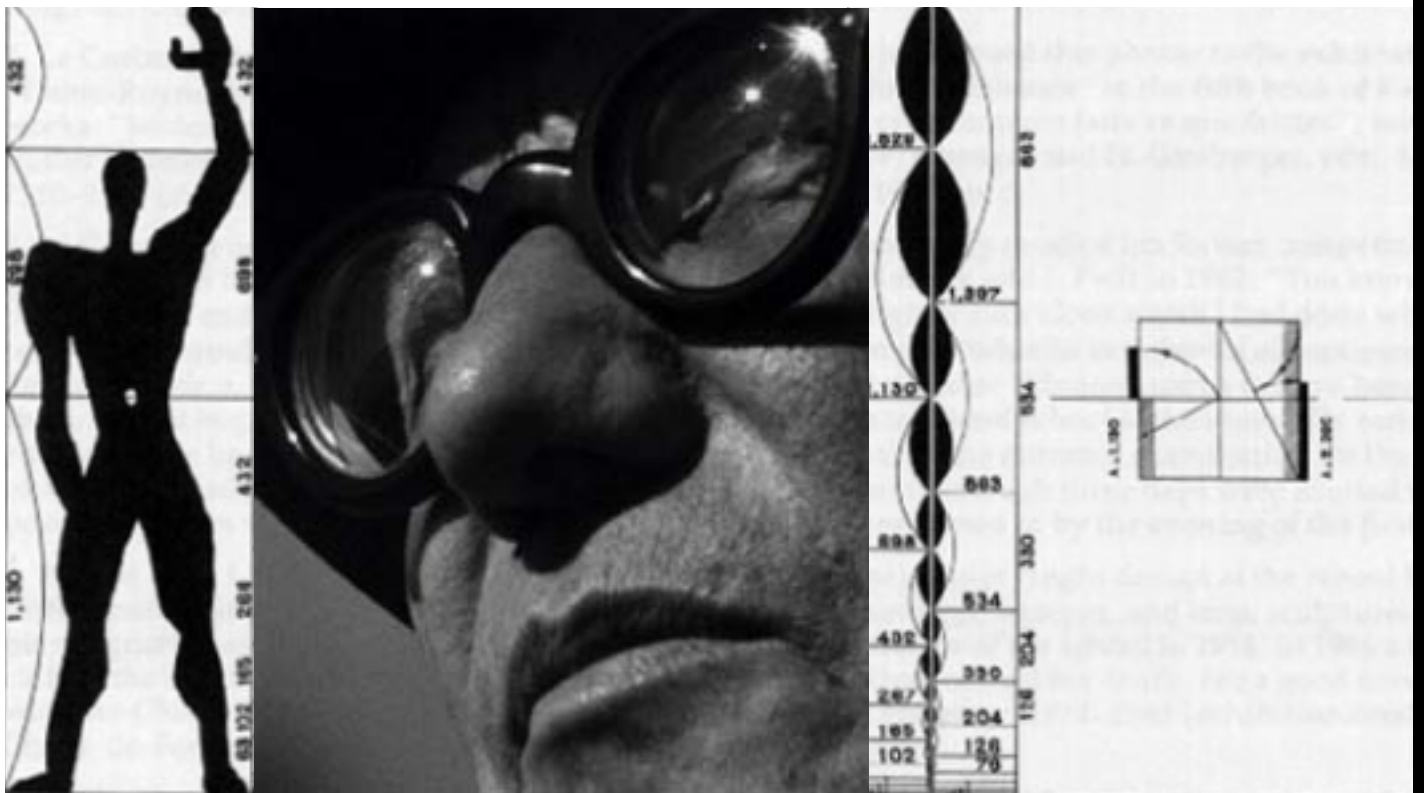
“ The representation of the contemporary city is no longer determined by... a succession of streets and avenues. From now on architecture must deal with the advent of technological space time... the interface man/machine replaces the facades of buildings, the ground on which they stand,

“ The representation of the contemporary city is no longer determined by... a succession of streets and avenues. From now on architecture must deal with the advent of technological space time... the interface man/machine replaces the facades of buildings, the ground on which they stand ”



Rem Kool haas 1995

The Corbusian Legacy



David Rudlin - www.urbed.coop