

Conference Paper

An Eldorado for the Working Class? The import of Constructivism and the Lubetkin Legacy

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the work of a particular architect whose work between the 1920s and 1960s traverses of the Cold War divides between 'east' and 'west': Berthold Lubetkin. Beginning as a student at the Soviet institutions of the post-revolutionary period and then practicing in France and Britain as a paradoxically pro-Soviet emigre, Lubetkin introduced avant-garde ideas to apparently sleepy and anti-modernist Britain. Following his career over this long period, this paper tracks the manner in which his work responds to the development of Soviet architecture from Constructivism to Stalinism, in the apparently different economic and political context of post-war Britain, then embarking on an experiment in social democracy. It then discusses the way in which the buildings have been either conserved or not conserved in the context of neoliberalism in Britain, and the ways in which this does – or doesn't – contrast with contemporary Russian practice.

Keywords: Constructivism, Communism, Cold War, Welfare State, Architecture

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Berthold Lubetkin holds a unique status in British, and to a degree also Soviet, architecture – although he is far better known in the United Kingdom than he is in the former Soviet Union, unsurprisingly given that it was in the UK that the overwhelming majority of his buildings were actually built. Born in Tbilisi in 1901 to middle class Jewish parents, educated in Moscow, Petrograd, Berlin and Warsaw, Lubetkin died in Bristol in 1990. Beginning in the early 1930s, he designed a series of apartment blocks, zoo buildings, and a health centre in London and elsewhere that were among the first serious modernist buildings in Britain, a country that had – certainly compared with the Soviet Union – been exceptionally parochial and slow to develop any sort of response to the modern architecture that had developed across Europe in the 1930s. The precedence, wit and beauty of these buildings, combined with the architect's

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exotic origins, strident politics and ability to give a good quote, have made him among the best known and most admired designers in 20th century Britain, with a degree of name recognition rare in modernist, or any other, architecture. His work appeared in wartime propaganda posters, with his Finsbury Health Centre, a structure that sat exactly between the 'social condensers' of mid-1920s Russia and the National Health Service created in late 1940s Britain, appearing on the designer Abram Games's 1943 poster declaring 'Your Britain – Fight for it Now', as an image of a promised socialist future as a reward for the sacrifices of the Second World War. He is one of the major figures of a documentary film, *Utopia London*. He appears on a mural in east London, and his name appears in a comic novel about the decline of the welfare state, Marina Lewycka's *The Lubetkin Legacy*. His daughter wrote an acclaimed memoir about his deficiencies as a father.

But in the Soviet context, he was in no way an important figure – as his biographer John Allan points out, he was a 'minor participant in huge events' ([1], 29), both in terms of his participation in the revolution, and in terms of his participation in Soviet architectural debates. In the context of the Ekaterinburg conference on the avant-garde and its legacies, I thought it appropriate to discuss Lubetkin and his work due to his traversal of the Cold War divides between 'east' and 'west', and his paradoxical reversals of what we expect to find in either part of the competing Blocs of the 20th century. Lubetkin's architecture and thought exhibits what are deeply Soviet ideas and approaches, transplanted to the most quiet and affluent of bourgeois democracies. In addition, his buildings have been accepted and celebrated to a degree that is still relatively rare among the work of his seniors in Soviet architecture, like Moisei Ginzburg or Konstantin Melnikov, and in many cases, his teachers, such as Alexander Vesnin and Nikolai Ladovsky. They have been conserved to varying degrees, in a capitalist context that has, albeit in a far less drastic way to the former USSR, undergone its own shift from a kind of socialism into an unrestrained and harsh capitalism. Accordingly, the fate of his buildings – particularly, his housing schemes – continues to speak of the possibilities of a socialist architecture informed by the ideas of the Soviet avant-garde, and of its ambiguous fate in the present.

1. A Soviet Architect?

Lubetkin's various autobiographical sketches and memoirs mention his support for the Bolsheviks in 1917, when he was a youth, service in the Red Army in the Civil War, and his study at the educational institutions that were so important in the development

of the Soviet avant-garde – SVOMAS in Petrograd, and VKhUTEMAS in Moscow (his bourgeois parents, meanwhile, emigrated to Warsaw soon after the revolution). In this *Dark House*, the memoir of Louise Kehoe, his youngest daughter, stresses Lubetkin's lifelong commitment to the Soviet project, which collapsed a year after his death, a commitment which is clear from his own writings, although with a certain degree of irony that Kehoe does not credit – she portrays him as a ferocious Stalinist, inflicting show trials and self-criticism tribunals on his own children. However, he left the Soviet Union exceptionally early, in 1922, and did not return until 1953. John Allan ascribes this to 'the curtailment of Proletcult (in which Lubetkin had been involved - OH), the introduction of NEP, the waning atmosphere of free experimentation and the prospect of a return to 'normality' in the stabilised USSR ([1], 38). If this is true, it would make Lubetkin one of the exceptionally few people to have left the land of the Soviets in the early 1920s because it wasn't left-wing enough. His gradual movement westwards in the next ten years – first to Berlin, where he assisted with the famous 1922 Exhibition of Russian Art, then to study at Warsaw Polytechnic, then to practice in Paris, then finally to London – suggests more the actions a wealthy dilettante. However, throughout this period, Lubetkin continued to publicly support the USSR, to work with Soviet institutions – particularly the Soviet Embassy in Paris, an occasional patron – and to keep abreast of developments in Soviet architectural and educational culture.

The earliest major result of this was at the Paris Exposition of Decorative Arts, in 1925, where Lubetkin was taxed with the difficult task of translating Konstantin Melnikov's free-form drawings of the Soviet Pavilion into a logical structure. In 1928, he would design with a Belarusian architect a Pavilion for the Soviet Trade Delegation in Bordeaux, in a lightweight fashion that suggests acquaintance both with Melnikov's work, and with the temporary kiosks of Alexei Gan and Gustav Klucis. But the first place that Lubetkin's own architecture can be seen emerging is the unbuilt competition entry for the Polytechnic of the Urals in, of all places, Sverdlovsk, so in a sense, a design for the place in which the conference this paper was delivered took place. This sprawling complex shows an interest in classical, rationalist geometry – the circle, most of all – combined with an exploration of the perceptual powers of open space, that showed Lubetkin's affinity with the Rationalist ASNOVA group, the Soviet faction to which he was probably closest; the elemental approach also resembles the 'utopian' classicism of late 18th century French architects like Bouleé and Ledoux, an influence which similarly recurs throughout his career. Other entries were developed by Lubetkin and various Parisian partners for the Centrosoyuz and Palace of the Soviets in Moscow, though of course none were awarded with contracts.

Upon his arrival in the UK in 1932, Lubetkin wrote two extremely influential studies of Soviet architecture, which would become the major sources on the subject in the English language until the work of Anatole Kopp and Catherine Cooke nearly fifty years later. The first part of Lubetkin's contribution, 'The Builders', begins with an assertion of the value of architectural and social theory, as 'the exhortation to struggle against blind chance is inscribed in gigantic letters on the pediment of socialism' [6]. From there, he recounts the early years of Soviet architecture, recalling the model of Tatlin's tower, 'constructed of old tins and cigar boxes', and the contrast between aspiration and reality in civil war-ravaged Russia; 'herded together in overcrowded flats, with rain driving through the decaying roofs, and deprived of all the things they had formerly been accustomed to, (architects) dreamt of glass and concrete palaces, skyscrapers with batteries of lifts and moving staircases' [6]. This soon developed into two schools, each with their own organisation. The first was ASNOVA, which stressed psychology and symbolism ('public libraries modelled on oil-fired boilers'), which he illustrates with Melnikov's Rusakov Workers Club, credited with an 'ingenuity of planning' as well as a 'formalist' stress on impression and drama. Lubetkin dismisses them on the grounds – striking for the AR, then as now – that 'Marxian philosophy pitilessly unmasks the vague criteria of universalism, abstract humanitarianism and eternal values as figments of the idealist philosophy of the bourgeois world', and demands that they adopt 'proletarian, that is dialectic methods' [6]. Of OSA, by then renamed SASS, 'Architects for Socialist Construction', he finds an equally undialectical fixation with technology and process over emotion and affect, but concedes that Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin building, looking stunning and snow-covered in one of Byron's photographs, shows that 'a very strong aesthetic preoccupation can be seen'. VOPRA, the incipient Socialist Realists, had then built little, but Lubetkin maintains a faint irony towards their gesturing and heroics – he approves that they wield 'one of the proletariat's most efficacious weapons, namely the emotional influence of art', but is sceptical of the heaviness and 'rather doubtful monumentalism' of the results.

The second part, on 'The Development of Town Planning' tracks the attempts by planners like Mikhail Okhitovich and Nikolai Milyutin to create a new kind of city that will promote the dissolving of the town-country divide, not to mention the 'liquidation of the family'. These articles make clear Lubetkin's curious position in Soviet debates – relaying them with a salty honesty unusual within the USSR itself, and refusing to take a partisan position on them. Later, he could be critical of shifts in the Soviet Union's architectural policies – in 1971, he wrote with deep regret about the demolition of the

Kitai-Gorod in Moscow, to make way for Stalinist boulevards in the mid-1930s, describing it as 'one of the most ruthless architectural crimes in recent times', erasing 'an evocative widescreen panorama which gave Moscow its grandeur, unity and spread' ([8, 9], 128). Similarly, he mocked the Stalinist belief that 'modern art is a scourge and visitation, imported by rootless cosmopolitan agents' ([8, 9], 126), as opposed to a phenomenon with deeply Russian roots. However, Lubetkin would never condemn the USSR in toto, and in fact could be almost propagandistic, we shall see when we come back later to his last visit, in 1953. So to a large degree we can say that when he worked in London, Lubetkin did so as a Soviet architect.

2. Against Fragmentation: Lubetkin in London

In this paper I will only discuss Lubetkin's major housing projects and one Health Centre, as opposed to his many private houses, zoo buildings, and other structures. The first of these is a luxury apartment block in the Rue de Versailles in Paris, designed with Jean Ginsburg and completed in 1931 – this is fairly standard Parisian modernism of the time, well-detailed and chic, in a tight infill site. Much more characteristic are Highpoint and Highpoint 2, the two large-scale housing schemes for a private developer in Highgate, an affluent intelligentsia district in north London. These are the first major products of Tecton, the firm that Lubetkin set up on a semi-collective basis soon after commencing practice in London, which involved close collaboration with British designers like Lindsay Drake, Valentine Harding, his wife Margaret Church, and his later partners Francis Skinner and Douglas Bailey; it would also launch the careers of some major architects such as Denys Lasdun, Peter Moro and Peter Yates, whose work would sharply diverge from Lubetkin's own. The first Highpoint, built in 1934, is Corbusian modernism at its purest, a cross-plan block in open green space, in rendered concrete with delicate, wave-form balconies, an image of trans-Continental luxury. It could in some senses be compared to the elegantly finished housing of OSA architects such as Ginzburg or Ivan Nikolaev, but it has a classical purity all of its own. Highpoint 2, however, saw a sharp turn from this exemplary example of the 'International Style', into the decoration and facade-treatment that would define Lubetkin's architecture for the rest of his career. From its entranceway – a thin concrete form held up by cast Greek caryatids – to its tile cladding and the fur rugs and cow-hide armchair of Lubetkin's own penthouse at the top, the building shows an interest in Surrealism and a lack of preoccupation with any sort of 'truth to materials'.

The extent of provision in both Highpoints – swimming pools, landscaped gardens, and spacious circulation spaces – has something in common with the Constructivist Dom-Kommuna, but it should be stressed that both of these buildings were for a moneyed clientele, reflecting the fact that the paying audience for modern architecture in Britain was largely the metropolitan intelligentsia. This changed only when Tecton were hired in 1935 to develop buildings and a new plan for the London Borough of Finsbury, governed by a left-leaning faction of the Labour Party, who were unusually committed to the avant-garde ideas Tecton propounded through their participation first in the MARS group, essentially the London faction of CIAM, and then in the more radical Architects and Technicians Organisation. In this capacity Tecton published a competition-winning scheme for ‘working class flats’, which is most likely what interested local socialist politicians in their work. The first result of Finsbury and Tecton’s collaboration is the famous Finsbury Health Centre – a building so celebrated that, as we have seen, it could be put on a wartime propaganda poster five years after its 1938 completion. The building is small, but looks monumental in photographs, a consequence of its planning, which consists of two splayed glass wings with a curved central volume approached by a formal walkway, giving the building something of the sort of symmetrical, anticipatory aspect of a palace. If this planning marked a departure from the dispersed pavilion planning of Constructivist architecture, in other respects it was an exemplary built example of a ‘social condenser’, with its multiple functions and its generous communal areas. Lubetkin, always aware of the propaganda quality of architecture, intended the building to serve as a ‘megaphone for health’, and on the building’s opening, being asked whether the avant-garde design was not inappropriate for its purpose, stated the oft-quoted words ‘nothing is too good for ordinary people’ [3].

Socially, as much as architecturally, Finsbury Health Centre was influential. It was wholly free at the point of use to residents of the borough, which was unusual at the time, but prefigured the wholly publicly owned National Health Service (NHS) that would be built in 1948, arguably the most extensive and complete socialist health care system in the world (‘East’ or ‘West’) until it began to be privatised in the 2000s. The NHS’s founder, the Welsh socialist politician Aneurin Bevan, opened Spa Green, the first of Tecton’s four post-war housing schemes (three of them in Finsbury). Spa Green built on the way in which Highpoint 2 and the Finsbury Health Centre abandoned the uniform of the International Style and of Constructivism in favour of an increasingly detailed and decorative system of facade treatments, enabled by the engineering talents of Ove Arup. In what is presumably a strange transplanted cousin of the notion

of an architecture 'national in form, socialist in content', he treated the facades with compositions of tile, brick and render which were apparently inspired by the Georgian carpets Lubetkin remembered from his childhood in Tbilisi. Each entrance is marked by impressive ramps, louvres and signs, to give the required sense of importance, to signal that this is something other than box-ticking en masse. That is, they were wholly un-standardised, an architecture that came from a specific response to a particular site, and that intended to be enjoyed as an aesthetic rather than merely functional object. Bevan's speech at the estate's opening declared that 'we will be judged by the quality of these homes' ([4], 81), not their quantity. This, like the buildings themselves, was a retort to those demanding greater speed, greater prefabrication, and if necessary smaller homes and fewer bathrooms to make greater numbers possible. These cost-cutting moves overtook the second of Tecton's Finsbury estates, the far denser and larger Priory Green, which continued the attractive communal areas and the decorated facades but with cheaper materials and slightly meaner spaces (although that's compared to a very high standard).

In all of this, the most notorious story is that of Bevin Court, the third and final of Tecton's estates in Finsbury. This y-shaped building was designed for Holford Square, a bomb-destroyed site alongside Percy Circus, the square in which Lenin had lived in London. Tecton intended to pay tribute in the name - Lenin Court. A memorial to the former resident, designed by Tecton, had been built on the square in 1943. In an unusual and wry embrace of standardisation on Lubetkin's part, it featured an organic curved frame that contained a standardised bust of the revolutionary, so that it could be easily replaced in the event of vandalism. Vandalised it certainly was, and in 1948, when Lenin Court was being completed, Finsbury council decided to remove it permanently (though in the 1970s, a plaque was placed on Lenin's house, which is still in place). In some stories, Lubetkin personally buried the memorial under the central staircase of the new building - which was then renamed after the Cold War foreign secretary, NATO founder and right-wing trade union leader Ernest Bevin, as the Labour councillors worried about paying such visible tribute to a Communist as the Cold War intensified. As Lubetkin's partner Francis Skinner pointed out, they only had to change two letters ([2], 119). Nonetheless, the building still contains within it Tecton's most astonishing invention - a complex Constructivist staircase made up of walkways forking off from a perfect central circle, creating an airy, geometric and curvaceous social space at the heart of the building, which residents often use instead of the lifts. It might be the single most breathtaking piece of modern architecture in Britain, and it's reserved solely for the everyday use of council tenants, a vindication of Lubetkin's notions of a

socialist modernism. The thought that it has buried underneath it a bust of Lenin adds mythic poignancy to the space, but it does not need it. The staircase is gratuitously magnificent, its grandeur utterly unnecessary, designed solely to inspire pleasure and awe.

In the 1950s, British modernist architecture had moved towards what was described as the 'New Brutalism', an architecture whose rough surfaces, twisted, asymmetrical plans and angular, hieratic compositions were totally in conflict with the Rationalism that Lubetkin had derived equally from Ladovsky and Ledoux. Perhaps more pointedly, the shift in British architecture schools and journals to Brutalism entailed a certain amount of McCarthyite rhetoric. On the one hand, the critique was formal. On appraising the last of the Tecton estates, Hallfield, in Paddington, completed by Denys Lasdun and Lindsay Drake after Lubetkin's withdrawal, Brutalism advocate Reyner Banham pointed out that 'facade treatments do not form part of the common theory of the modern movement...all wall elements appear to float in order to reduce the apparent weight of the block' ([12], 113). In his original article 'The New Brutalism', Banham argued that a particular school of London architecture – favouring a decorative, whimsical modernism he dubs 'people's detailing' – was closely associated with the Communist Party of Great Britain, and that their move from the International Style so visible in Highpoint into the facadism of, say, Spa Green, was their attempt to follow Zhdanovite architectural policy – a British version of Socialist Realism. This was spurious in the case of most of these architects, whose work was much more inspired by that of 1940s Sweden than by 1940s Moscow – but it has some accuracy in the case of Lubetkin himself.

According to their daughter, both Lubetkin and his wife and Tecton partner Margaret Church were card-carrying members of the Communist Party of Great Britain. They returned to the USSR in 1953 – perhaps not accidentally, in the year of Stalin's death – with a delegation of British architects. A photo exists of the group in one of the high Stalinist palatial stations of the Moscow Metro. In his write-up of the trip for the *Architectural Association Journal* of May 1956, Lubetkin was even more critical than he had been in 1932 of Soviet modernism as it was conventionally understood. The Constructivists' obsession with 'maximum economy' had 'reduced architecture to the level of the activities of certain species of insects and mammals', entirely 'emptied of all emotional content' [7]. He finally asserted that 'all the aggressive self-assertion with which the functionalists asserted their creed could mask neither the barrenness of their doctrine nor the sterility of their practice. The few remaining buildings of the period bear witness to it. Whatever was intended at the time, these buildings with their

barbed wire aesthetics remain for us grim forerunners of the lugubrious architecture of the concentration camp and the crematorium. Their stark harshness is full of a metallic mechanical clangour, a nail-biting pedantry' ([7]; Kehoe 1997, 207). For anyone who assumed that Lubetkin learned much from the likes of Melnikov and Ginzburg, the article must have been a shock – as it still is. It's hard not to wonder if he's using their example to settle scores with the Brutalist generation, those architects and critics that denounced his move in the '40s into patterned facades, ornamental details and beaux-arts plans.

Lubetkin stayed enough of a modernist to have some reserve towards the Beaux-Arts influenced Socialist Realist architecture that dominated the cities he visited – Leningrad, Moscow, Stalingrad, and his native Tbilisi – at the time of his tour, describing the applied motifs on the new buildings as 'haberdashery'. He saw the emergence of this architecture, typically, in functional terms, as something necessitated by the need to employ professionals who knew what they were doing; but explained it also by the fact that 'in the light of Marxist philosophy, culture ceases to be regarded as a sanctuary', but must 'permeate the masses and be accessible to everyone, universally comprehensible'. However kitsch it might have been, Soviet architecture managed that, creating monumental ensembles like the riverside embankments in the reconstructed Stalingrad, or the beaux-arts symmetry of Moscow State University, commanding a landscaped position on the Lenin Hills whose pathos-filled spatial grandeur 'no architect is likely to forget', no matter how clad in 'fragments from a monumental mason's catalogue' [7]. In particular, Lubetkin found these buildings a reproach to the fragmentation of Brutalism and the anti-monumentality of much post-war British 'mixed development'. This was town planning on the grand scale, and here, Soviet architects showed that they had understood the premises of dialectical materialism. Lubetkin predicted for them a bright future.

It is possible that this cautious engagement with the monumentalism of Socialist Realism inspired the enormous sense of scale and the tragic, pathos-ridden grandeur of Lubetkin's last works, when he was working as a partner with two former Tecton designers as Skinner, Bailey and Lubetkin. Lubetkin, who had moved to Gloucestershire in the 1940s to run a pig farm, was infuriated by the rejection of his visionary plans for the Durham coalfield new town of Peterlee, and mostly withdrew from practice (and as his daughter's memoir bitterly argues, from social life altogether). In those projects he did work on, he concentrated his energies on trying to adapt (or, as opponents claimed, mask) the extremely low budgets set for his mass housing projects, by creating rhetorical images of symmetry, alignment and unity. Such was the model for two

huge projects in Bethnal Green, the Dorset Estate in Shoreditch, with its blocks named after the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs', a group of early trade unionists who were deported to Australia for their organising, and the Cranbrook Estate in Globe Town (there is one smaller, the Lakeview Estate, but is a comparatively minor work), both of them built between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s. Lubetkin had by this time moved even further away from acceptable modernist architecture, but they are even more obsessive and remarkable than Bevin Court: huge slabs and towers arranged around tree-lined monumental routes that seem to have escaped from eighteenth-century France, all of them with riotously individual, sensual and vertiginous staircases.

Everywhere, in these two estates, you can see Skinner, Bailey and Lubetkin straining against the limits on overspending on mere council housing. Extreme, flamboyant spatial ideas are placed on wan council lawns, dazzling patterns are executed in cheap tile and brick, the staircases are clad in the nearest the architects could get to a shiny stone, now coated in layers of dust, leading to claustrophobic vandal-proof lifts – a state obviously aided and abetted by decades of neglect. The multifunctional aims of the 'social condenser' have become some rather shabby libraries and pubs. All these features are statements of collectivity and abundance in an era of increasingly atomised consumerism, heroic attempts to wish the socialist community back into being. They're a bid by a committed and slightly Stalinist Communist to bring into being with the slightest of means the original promise of the socialist future. As such, they stand much more closely for the eventual fate of 1945's more expansive dreams than most of the housing that actually resulted. For someone like Lubetkin, the housing of the welfare state fell considerably short of what he'd hoped, and instead his architecture strains to achieve the impossible. Both the Dorset Estate and the Cranbrook Estate display what John Allan calls 'a unique synthesis of the Constructivist and classical traditions' ([1], 540). You can play spot the reference in them, if you like – the staircases seem to come from Inigo Jones, the play of interlocking cylinders from Borromini, the free treatment of mechanical geometry from the work of his VKhUTEMAS teachers, from Tatlin's tower or from theatrical work such as Liubov Popova's set for Meyerhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. For years, these estates were almost forgotten; in a curt reference to them in his *Modern Buildings in London*, the open-minded critic Ian Nairn contrasted them with what he considered to be the already problematic work in Finsbury, and argued that 'the drabness has become active, not passive' ([11], 30). These buildings loom and lower, like the Stalinist ensembles from which they take partial inspiration. They can be alternately conceived as an experience of intriguing completeness and rationality, or one of intimidation and obsessive rationalism.

3. Out of Time: Lubetkin's Socialist Architecture under Neoliberalism

To conclude, we will examine the different ways these structures have been restored, renovated or otherwise in the last thirty years. Near the end of his life, Lubetkin was a strident critic of the destruction of what he thought was an already far too compromised social democratic welfare state, at the hands of the privatisation programmes of Margaret Thatcher, which had particularly problematic outcomes for council housing, like the Tecton and Skinner, Bailey and Lubetkin estates in Finsbury, Paddington and Bethnal Green – the 'Right to Buy' council housing, combined with an effective ban on new council construction, turned state-owned public housing from something intended to be as good as, or better than, private housing, into a residual housing for the very poor. By this time, an interest in the social aspirations of 'the Thirties' (rather than their apparently more ambiguous implementation in the 50s and 60s) had coincided with Lubetkin's re-emergence as a public speaker and writer. Highpoint and Highpoint 2, were sympathetically restored as long ago as the 1980s, and, always popular, became 'iconic' images of that decade. They are now almost kitsch as references. They appear in everything from St Etienne's film of praise to London, Finisterre (–) to a series of plates and mugs produced by the designers People Will Always Need Plates. This is unsurprising, given that both have been for some time resolutely uncontroversial buildings, socialist ideals uncorrupted by having to actually deal with working class people.

The restoration of the Finsbury buildings has happened more slowly, given that the local authorities that own them have extremely low budgets, deliberately kept low by central government in what has been a successful attempt to curb municipal power. In around 2010, Spa Green was intelligently restored in such a way that the polychrome patterns of its facade 'carpets' became much more visible – and this is, it should be noted, an simple job to do, given that the tiles of the buildings were designed in order to be easily cleaned. Bevin Court was restored in 2016, most notably repainting the staircase in Lubetkin's original red-black-white colour scheme, in which the affinity with Rodchenko, Klucis or Melnikov appears much more clearly. Finsbury Health Centre has been less lucky, despite being materially similar. The building was very nearly privatised in 2010, as the National Health Service would have been able to get a large sum of (desperately needed) money from the sale of the site, in what is now, by contrast with the 1930s, a desirable and wealthy part of London. This sell-off was halted only by a popular and well-publicised campaign, elicited by the building's immense

importance in the development of the NHS. Priory Green, meanwhile, has faced an ambiguous fate. Of all these estates, it had fallen most conspicuously into decline by the 1980s, being close to the area around Kings Cross railway station, a major area for drug dealing and prostitution. The response has been extreme. The estate was given in 1998 by the council to the charitable housing association Peabody, who restored it – at a price. The buildings have been cleaned and the public spaces relatively well-kept, but at the cost of a gigantic security apparatus of electronic fences, gates and CCTV, with entire through-streets of the estate impassable for non-residents. This is part of a programme of the New Labour government of the time's attempt to 'design out crime' by security features, something Lubetkin, as a believer in public space and what he called 'civic valour' would have regarded with the purest horror.

In the case of the Dorset and Cranbrook estates, the obviously somewhat gimcrack nature of the designs meant that they did not, initially, form part of the Lubetkin canon or the modernist revival pantheon. They have not hitherto appeared on plates or T-shirts, or been celebrated in popular documentary films. However, one of Skinner, Bailey and Lubetkin's late estates is exceptionally well located. The Dorset Estate, and particularly its high point-block, Sivill House, are just around the corner from the main streets of Shoreditch, an area that has gone from being a slum to being a global hipster capital, London's equivalent to Chelsea or the Meatpacking District in New York. Google 'Sivill House' and you'll find that a one-bedroom ex-council flat can cost as much as £400,000. The adverts for flats there, on property websites such as RightMove, will usually point out as one of the tower's Unique Selling Points the fact that it was designed by the great Berthold Lubetkin. In a recent book, *Modernist Estates*, a graphic designer profiles the designers, architects and antiques dealers that have moved into Lubetkin's socialist housing estates. One of its interviewees lives on the fourteenth floor of Sivill House. However, none of Lubetkin's council estates have faced the fate of his former Tecton partner Denys Lasdun's Brutalist Keeling House, which was directly sold off by its council owners to private developers as luxury housing. The Dorset Estate and the Cranbrook Estate are both still extremely dilapidated, and have the paradoxical situation of wealthy owners and private renters paying enormous sums for flats that their neighbours will still be paying an exceptionally low 'social rent' for.

In a recent article for the *London Review of Books*, James Meek used the Cranbrook Estate as a means of telling the story of council housing and municipal socialism in Britain, interviewing councillors, housing associations and original residents. One of the latter 'pointed to the armchair where I was sitting and told me Lubetkin had sat in that very place, asking how she liked her new digs. I was sceptical: perhaps it was

Skinner, or Bailey? But Kendall insisted it had been the old man himself, strong Russian accent and all. 'I always had the impression that he was the boss. We all used to come, all the mums, and meet him and he'd say: "How's things working?" He'd come in and have a biscuit and a cup of tea and he'd say that no matter what flat he went into, his décor went with the furniture. He was very proud that everything went together.' This gives one of the more interesting explanations for Lubetkin's move from smooth rendered white walls into multicoloured carpets, an eye to the decorative tastes of working class residents. Kendall lists for Meek all the ways in which the designs were ruined by the parsimony of the buildings' owners.

'Originally the façades of the towers were cut into by deep openings that left the broad hallways between flats open to the air and gave Kendall a view of St Paul's Cathedral; after the 1987 storm, the council replaced them with blank steel shutters that close off the view from inside and, from outside, echo the bleak appearance of a row of shuttered shops. The green bosses studding the façades of the towers were originally made of concrete faced with glass beads that glittered in the sun; the council replaced them with aluminium boxes. Now when it rains, residents are driven mad by the sound of the drops rattling on the metal....Lubetkin's last artistic statement to the world was his finishing touch to the estate. In his vision, a broad, tree-lined pedestrian boulevard was to lead from Roman Road through Cranbrook to the great open space of Victoria Park. The boulevard exists, but the council refused to buy the last sliver of land blocking Cranbrook from the park's chestnut trees and ornamental lake. Lubetkin filled the melancholy dead end that resulted with a trompe l'oeil sculpture of a ramp and receding hoops, which, as you approached it, seemed to take you towards some mysterious, hopeful future point. It's gone now; the council failed to maintain it. When I saw her, Kendall had just had a circular from the council announcing a new initiative to give children 'a sense of ownership' of the estate by encouraging them to express themselves freely with paint on the walls around the old sculpture. The project was to be called 'Bling My Hood' [10].

The latter is a small, rather crass reminder that this is one of the areas that has been important for the development of black British culture. There are several grime videos shot on the Cranbrook Estate, both because of the amount of grime artists from Globe Town and nearby Bow, and because of their undoubted photogenic appeal. One could perhaps hail the creativity of this music as a possible outcome of Lubetkin's last desperate attempts to stop council housing from being 'normal' or 'banal', but equally,

it is a sign of failure – these are images of what grime MCs describe as ‘the ghetto’, built on top of, and intended to be the end of, the slums.

What worries Meek most in his article is that to restore the Cranbrook Estate to its original ideas – as has happened in Highpoint, Spa Green, Bevin Court – would be prohibitively expensive, and that as a result, its owners would prefer to ‘increase the number of homes on the site by building over its green spaces or knocking it down and starting from scratch’. Facing a massive housing shortage, London, like Moscow, is building on the open spaces of its municipal estates – an easy approach to shortages, given that these spaces are in public ownership. In this, Lubetkin’s holistic, classical approach to the city would obviously be a casualty; and notably, the Dorset and Cranbrook estates stand as his most wholesale, large-scale attempts at planning, rather than an elegant fragment such as the two Highpoints. But most of all, the fate of these places makes it clear that, rather than there being an opposition today between the backward east, unaware of its modernist heritage and preferring to destroy it in favour of a half-understood image of capitalist globalism, and a progressive west that restores and cares for its buildings and urban spaces, London and Moscow increasingly follow similar approaches, with well-designed public space being a matter for the touristic centre – whether Tate Modern or Gorky Park – and the notion that ‘nothing is too good for ordinary people’ being considered quaint and outdated. Lubetkin was aware of this. Near the end of his life, he argued that ‘the philosophical aim and orderly character of these designs are diametrically opposed to the intellectual climate in which we live’; no wonder they are so often either reduced to kitsch or left to rot. ‘My personal interpretation is that these buildings cry out for a world that has never come into being’ ([1], 366).

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