

# GOLD

---

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS  
AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND  
VOL. 33**

Edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad

Published in Melbourne, Australia, by SAHANZ, 2016

ISBN: 978-0-7340-5265-0

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

**Hannah Lewi** "Look Away Prince Charles: Goldfinger is Classic." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 33, Gold*, edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad, 380-392. Melbourne: SAHANZ, 2016.

All efforts have been undertaken to ensure that authors have secured appropriate permissions to reproduce the images illustrating individual contributions. Interested parties may contact the editors.

## LOOK AWAY PRINCE CHARLES: GOLDFINGER IS CLASSIC

*So said Stephen Bayley in The Telegraph in 2016, writing on the recent heritage listing of Ernö Goldfinger's Alexander Fleming House in London. His article, which extols the virtues of Goldfinger's architecture against a long tide of conservative critique, is reflective of a current reversal of fortunes for some surviving examples of British Modernism. As testament to the depths of previous antipathy towards this Hungarian émigré, the novelist Ian Fleming was said to have based his evil character "Auric (gold-like) Goldfinger" in the novel of the same name on Ernö, as he was a neighbour to the modern house he built for his family in Hampstead.*

*The paper focuses on one extant example of Goldfinger's work - the Balfron Tower and Brownfield Estate in the east of London - supported by fieldwork, archival and media research. Through the Balfron site, which is now heritage listed and undergoing a major conservation program and the figure of Goldfinger himself, the often surprising and changeable course of taste-making in architecture will be discussed. Contrast is drawn to the neighbouring Robin Hood Gardens estate by Alison and Peter Smithson.*

*The motivations for and mechanisms of taste and re-evaluation of modern British architecture are reflected upon. They include: heritage evaluation, through recognition by listing, conservation and documentation work, which in the case of Goldfinger's work has been undertaken by the National Trust, Historic England and Avanti Architects; the current scholarly re-evaluation of British Modernism and Brutalism from fresh perspectives by the likes of Elain Harwood, Jonathon Meades and Owen Hatherley; and the opinions of media and popular taste-makers, through newspapers, blogs, fashion and music video shoots. Through a backdrop of changing political ideologies, and by the dismantling of the Welfare State and public housing provision in the last three decades, alongside current housing shortages in London, the tussle between social value, conservation and gentrification is examined.*

## Trip out East

We took the new Docklands Overland rail to Poplar, venturing out into the recently re-made terrain of East London: re-made in places while monotonously familiar in others. It was grey and starting to rain as we alighted onto the East India Dock road where – as in the lyrics of The Clientele’s ‘Losing Haringey’ song – we walked “past the terraces of chip and kebab shops, past the tube station ... Turkish supermarket after chicken restaurant after spare parts shops”<sup>1</sup> ... and then crossed the road towards Robin Hood Gardens. News of its death has been exaggerated. Although slated for demolition since the middle of last year, Robin Hood Gardens (1972) still stands. If washing hanging from grimy balconies is any sign, then it is still partially inhabited. But judging by broken windows and graffiti then it is already partially vacated. The site looked unloved and far removed from the heroic and hopeful images that were portrayed of the estate as depicted in Alison and Peter Smithson’s original drawings of the late 1960s, and as much reproduced in their later collections. The iconic (well iconic to a few) landscaped mound of grass in the centre of the scheme, made from the leftover rubble of the demolished estate that previously occupied the site, was overgrown; now populated, not with children playing optimistically, but with forlorn and broken pink concrete turtle play equipment.

Security guards in fluorescent safety vests checked our intentions vaguely as I cautiously returned my camera to my backpack. The strategy of shielding the 214 flats in the estate from the visual and acoustic ravages of the Blackwall Tunnel Approach by creating two inward-looking ribbon-blocks looked less successful than originally professed. Was this an estate that could be saved? Should it have been heritage listed as many notable and vocal architectural campaigners have wanted? In its current – presumably intended – state of dereliction it was hard to think favourably on its possible futures. Or in the words of Rowan Moore of *The Guardian*: “it just looks a bit grim.”<sup>2</sup>

Leaving Robin Hood Gardens we picked our way through newer estate car parks and ring roads, past All Saints church designed by Charles Hollis in the 1820s to serve the then rapidly growing parish around the East India Docks, past impressive new Astro-turf sporting facilities – perhaps the contemporary equivalent of the parish church. Balfour Tower appeared in our sodden view ahead. Although the main tower entry was under scaffold with much work clearly still to be done, some of the estate looked recently maintained and lived in. The adjacent low-rise Carradale House that forms, with the tower, the ‘Brownfield Estate’ has been quite spruced up with new facades of robust white windows and doors, and external timber panelling inserted into the rough expressive concrete frame. Well-used bikes and children’s toys populated balconies here. And we saw a likely architecture student leaving the tower.

Iain Sinclair writes on walking the territory of East London far more evocatively: “We were due some breakfast and a reappraisal of our goals. We’re so wet now that this posh rain, sharper and cleaner, seems to improve our general condition – sluicing off the sooty deposits of Old Ford, Limehouse, Poplar, Millwall, and stinging us until we glow ... It’s coming straight down, no argument, bar-code blocks of it – driving us into the shelter of the nearest greasy caff.”<sup>3</sup> Yet to be honest this was not really authentic to our experience as Sinclair, writing over a decade ago, records a largely un-gentrified and pre-Olympic territory. Now there are pockets of newness and deliberate injections of infrastructure, capital and culture: we lunched in the café of a new dance academy, for instance, and were offered homemade organic bread with our homemade onion soup. This transformation was all the more apparent in the afternoon walking around the Olympic site and Westfield shopping mall in nearby Stratford (that great contribution of Australian consumption to the world).

The story of Balfour Tower and Brownfield Estate, and its architect Ernő Goldfinger, has been one of twists and turns of fate and fashion. And this paper is largely about understanding the evolving reputation of a work of architecture, not a detailed history of its design and realisation. How have some inspired public housing estates been recently re-loved (or perhaps loved to death) after what seemed like terminal hatred and distrust of concrete megastructures that served and celebrated the aspirations of the former British Welfare State? For others, like Robin Hood Gardens, their future appears immanently terminal. Therefore, although primarily focused on Goldfinger’s Balfour Tower, Robin Hood

Gardens looms as a counterpoint in this account. Accelerated gentrification in East London has brought additional pressures, and this paper concludes with questions around its paradoxical effects on current heritage outcomes.

**“I want to be remembered as a Classical architect, not a Kasbah architect”<sup>4</sup>**

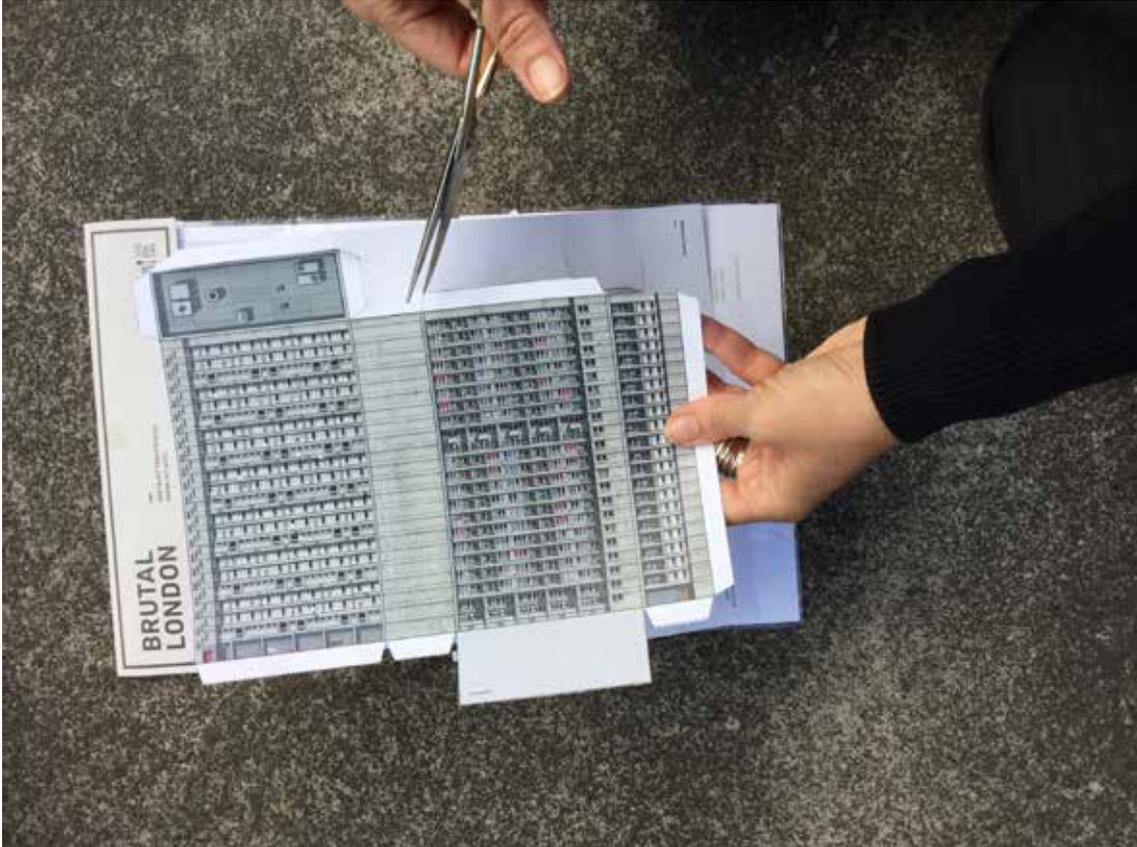


FIGURE 1 The Balfour Tower model under construction. Author

There has been no definitive monograph written about Ernő Goldfinger yet, although there is one biography and two compilations of his drawings and projects; a number of which are also included in broader surveys about British Modernism. Although this paper will not revisit Goldfinger the architect more generally, given the theme of *Gold SAHANZ* 2016, some brief explanation of the link is warranted. Nigel Warburton's biography opens with the story about Goldfinger's namesake created by the James Bond novelist Ian Fleming - as though this association needs to be got off the chest, so to speak.<sup>5</sup> Through Goldfinger's wife Ursula Blackwell, Fleming knew of the architect, who at this stage lived nearby in the north London suburb of Hampstead. So the story goes, Fleming did not appreciate Goldfinger's houses in Willow Road that he had built for his family in 1938 across from Hampstead Heath. Despite being brick and timber rather than “white box Modernism” it was, by British standards anyway, thoroughly ahead of its time.<sup>6</sup>

In 1959, Ernő heard about Fleming's next novel titled *Goldfinger*. In this book the evil character of Auric Goldfinger works for a Soviet agency called SMERSH and is, along with Pussy Galore, eventually overpowered by Bond. Fleming describes Auric as follows: “You won't believe it, but he's a Britisher. Domiciled in Nassau. You'd think he was a Jew from the name, but he doesn't look it.”<sup>7</sup> Fleming had a habit of basing characters on those he knew around him, so this was not that unusual. But there was certainly some proximity (not physical as Auric was short and ginger-haired, usually dressed in muted gold tweeds, and Ernő was tall and dashing). Goldfinger was a Hungarian émigré to England who was a vocal proponent of, what was largely still perceived as ‘foreign’, Modernism in Britain in the pre-WWII context. He was engaged in fundraising for Soviet causes, and designed both the Daily Worker and Communist Party Headquarters buildings in London.<sup>8</sup> Goldfinger took legal action against Fleming's publishers, who agreed out of court

that all references to the character must always use his first name Auric to differentiate him from Ernö. (Warburton notes that Fleming was not pleased and threatened to change the character's name to "Goldprick".<sup>9</sup>) The publisher also apparently generously delivered six free amended copies to Willow Road. However, when the hit film version with Sean Connery as Bond was released in 1964, these conciliatory actions were eclipsed by its notoriety.<sup>10</sup>

Goldfinger was born in Budapest in 1902, was educated at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the early 1920s. There he was profoundly affected by Le Corbusier's *Vers Une Architecture* and he invited Le Corbusier to lead a new atelier. He declined the invitation. Importantly, however, Auguste Perret accepted – and this would have a great impact on Goldfinger's architectural career, in particular his love of expressive concrete.

**"Ernö had ambitions to build upwards from a very early stage in his architectural career"<sup>11</sup>**



FIGURE 2 The Balfour Tower model under construction. Author

In 1933 Goldfinger presented plans for a fifteen-storey *unite d'habitation*, complete with a communal restaurant, a nursery and infants' school, to the CIAM Congress in Athens. Although having built little his notoriety was growing. He was described by one critic in a letter dated 1937 to *Daily Sketch* as "no more than a pimple on the rump of Wren."<sup>12</sup> He imagined other urban schemes in the heart of Georgian London, including the ringing of Hampstead Heath with forty-storey towers. And, in 1955, he and H.T. Cadbury-Brown designed a twenty-seven-storey office block in the city. He participated with the Smithsons in the propositional exhibition *This is Tomorrow* in 1956. And he reported to the *Sunday Times* in 1960 on his vision that London should be a "park" city not a "garden" city – which could only be achieved through the consolidation of sprawl by tower blocks.<sup>13</sup> Although a vision that with hindsight fell quickly from utopian to dystopian, it revealed Goldfinger's wholesale investment in a CIAM-inspired idea of the designed, modern urban terrain, and the importance of properly landscaped open spaces and amenities around tall buildings.<sup>14</sup>

As Elain Harwood describes, there is no doubt that public and private housing provision was a critically pressing issue in Britain, pre and post-WWII.<sup>15</sup> The London County Council, which grew enormously in the immediate post-war

decades, delivered much by way of housing solutions in London in the 1950s. However, by 1961 the LCC's rate of building was recognised as slower than needed and it began to offer commissions to external architects in private practice. An 'approved panel' of some fifty names was drawn up; there were very few younger practices (for example, Stirling and Gowan was excluded). But some jobs were granted to names off the list, like Ernö Goldfinger, who was given the opportunity to design a scheme for Poplar, just east of the Lansbury Estate.

Poplar in East London was identified as a problem area from the 1890s onwards with decline due, as elsewhere, to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. But it also spawned a tradition of local political activism - 'Poplarism' - that fought for action and solutions that were slow to take effect after the Housing Act of 1930, and regeneration plans like Abercrombie and Forshaw's 1943 *County of London Plan*. To exacerbate conditions, more than a quarter of Poplar's buildings were irreparably damaged by 1945 (around 8500 buildings of the LCC housing stock were bomb-damaged and great numbers of families were displaced in Poplar). Goldfinger had, during the war, worked on plans for postwar housing recovery and gained much publicity of these modern and forward-thinking ideas through accessible media and exhibitions. In Poplar he wanted to address the still broken housing stock and the lack of green space. What was acutely important in his final realisation of public housing in the area was, not just housing provision itself but also the building of local community amenities. Important also to these community-building aspirations was the selection of tenants to move into the new estates; with all but two of the 146 flats in the Balfron development said to be occupied with local residents.<sup>16</sup>

The Brownfield Estate was designed in three phases: Balfron Tower (1963-5); Carradale House (1967-70) – medium-rise blocks divided into three linking elements; and Glenkerry House (1967-76) including a community centre, nursery, shops, old people's facility, club and surgery.<sup>17</sup> The plan of Balfron and Carradale featured a re-interpretation of the already explored 'street decks in the sky' concept, and the service core tower and lifts were strikingly separated from the main residential tower. Nine shared walkways or decks - one per three levels of flats - bridged the two blocks, and were conceived to reduce noise and improve privacy, travel and construction efficiency. The resulting twenty-six storey residential tower was open and regular in its modulation, with elevational compositions based on the Golden Section. Maisonettes placed on the ground floor and Level Fifteen relieved uniformity in scale. All flats had floor to ceiling glazing and balconies. And an expressive upper floor housing the boilers freed up ground floor areas for open play areas.

Balfron, named after a town south of Glasgow, acknowledged the Scottish associations in the Poplar area, but also evoked (as many have described) a Scottish fortified concrete structure.<sup>18</sup> The separate service tower strengthened analogies to a castle - with bush-hammered finish, slit-like openings and chimney flues that looked like heraldic masts. Although there were many other more accommodating flourishes and finishes (signage, use of coloured tiling and marble in the entry hall etc.), the overall effect has been called, somewhat politely, "uncompromising."<sup>19</sup> James Dunnett, in his essay "A Terrible Beauty" of 1983, admired Goldfinger's public housing schemes that were designed to "secure sun, space and greenery" for their inhabitants.<sup>20</sup> However, as he continues:

... in Goldfinger's hands the millennial utopian vision has acquired an air of menace, the ideal has been pushed to its very limits. The sheer scale and drama of their architecture are exciting, but unnerving. Exciting because the control of form is so complete... Raw concrete has rarely seemed so beautiful.<sup>21</sup>

Dunnett (and others who have followed like Jonathan Meades) cast Goldfinger's Modernism as sublimely terrible, not just in scale but in formal language. He compared it to the massiveness and expressiveness of Vanbrugh, thus also reclaiming 1960s Modernism as being thoroughly British in legacy and thoroughly unlike earlier Modernist manifestations.<sup>22</sup> He continues:

It is as though Goldfinger, from among the Functionalism totems, had chosen as a source of inspiration the artefacts of war. The sheer concrete walls of the circulation towers are pierced only by slits; cascading down the façade like rain, they impart a delicate sense of terror. At the summit of the tower the boiler house is cantilevered far out; with its ribbon glazing and surmounted by flues it evokes the bridge of a warship.<sup>23</sup>

These formal themes were continued in Goldfinger's next public housing scheme Trellick Tower in West London (unfortunately dubbed 'the Tower of Terror' as it fell into severe decline and mismanagement); a more slender and highly detailed version of the Balfron scheme constructed in 1972. It too had amenities to serve the housing estate including a nursery, shops, doctor's surgery, pub and, for a time, Goldfinger's own office. Indeed, the language of the castle fortifications has been a continual theme in describing other public housing schemes including Robin Hood

Gardens. Owen Hatherley writes: “What is a castle but an unornamented, semi-military, functionalist fortress designed to protect its inhabitants? A modern castle would be closer to Alison and Peter Smithson’s East End council estate Robin Hood Gardens, setting its face against the thunder of Blackwall tunnel, sheltering its mainly Bengali tenants from the motorised killing machines ...”<sup>24</sup>

Although forbidding in form, it can be argued that Balfron and Trellick represent a robust attempt at providing a socially inspired vision of twentieth century living, with sensitive attention to the design of on-site community services and amenities. In these estates one sees an uneasy amalgam of socially progressive intentions, as born out of postwar reconstruction, yet delivered in a highly defensive form. And despite a great flurry of post-2000 media musings around the defensive, heroic, ‘bloody-minded’ and monumental attributes of brutal Modernism, most of its original proponents did not say much publically at the time to reassure or inform about this paradoxical amalgam that did not sound paternalistic, scientific, defensive or over-confident. Goldfinger, unlike the Smithsons, was not a prolific writer. He did write essays on such topics as ‘The Sensation of Space’, ‘Urbanism and Spatial Order’, and ‘The Elements of Enclosed Space’ for *The Architectural Review* in the early 1940s, that in various ways attempted to link Modern solutions with classical precedents, to empirically understand perception and sensation, and to put forward new urban models.<sup>25</sup> However, he wrote nothing of length about investing in the needs of families who would live in the estates, or explicitly about his ideas on the social or the communal.

This reading accords with Adrian Forty’s observations that Modern architecture had inherent and ongoing difficulties in articulating the social qualities it claimed for its works.<sup>26</sup> Where society is conceived, it is embedded in some generalised reference to and investment in community, and to the deep “dichotomy between public and private.”<sup>27</sup> However, although Goldfinger did not reflect publically on everyday inhabitation and use in the same way as he did on other architectural and urban qualities, he was obviously deeply interested in designing for local communities within his conception of a modern postwar society. These concerns come through in snippets of quotes from news media responses to the Balfron publicity. He said for example: “The success of any scheme depends on the human factor – the relationships of people to each other and the frame of their daily life which the building provides.”<sup>28</sup> And he defensively asserted in *The East London Advertiser* of 1969: “I have created here nine separate streets, on nine different levels, all with their own rows of front doors. The people living here can sit on their doorsteps and chat to the people next door if they want to. A community spirit is still possible even in these tall blocks, and any criticism that it isn’t is just rubbish.”<sup>29</sup>

Dunnett again concludes on the complexities of a defensive social vision: “Is this then the image of the totalitarian perversion of that quest for welfare which was central to the Modern Movement? ... It requires strength to be inspired by it and not run for cover. Goldfinger’s is a demanding architecture, whose place is at the centre of intellectual life.”<sup>30</sup>

#### **“I am sorry to hear your house is so noisy”**

Thank you for your letter of 23rd February.

I am sorry to hear that your house is so noisy. The only effective solution I can think of would be to install double glazing on all the windows. I appreciate this would be an expensive proposition. As you say, ear-plugs are a cheaper alternative.

Yours sincerely,  
Ernö Goldfinger<sup>31</sup>

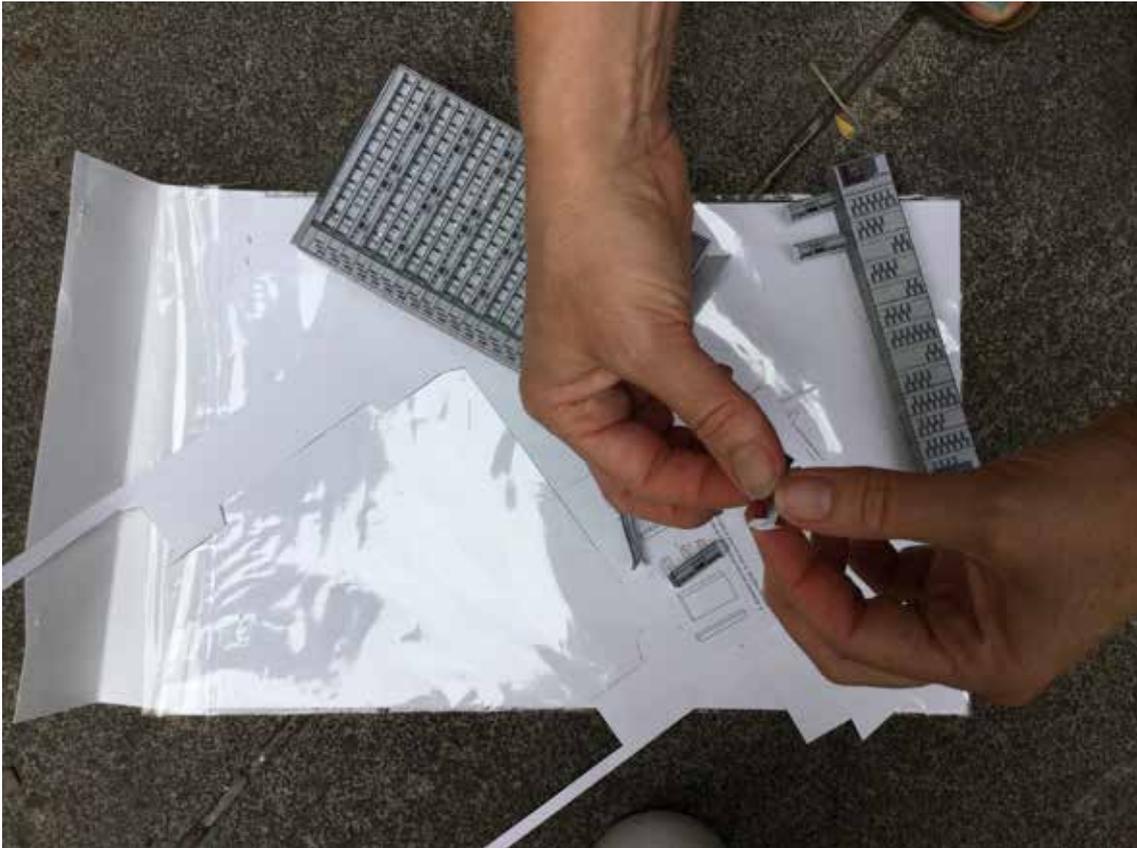


FIGURE 3 The Balfour Tower model under construction. Author

Perhaps, however, Goldfinger's actions spoke louder than his words in expressing a concern for the user as 'tenant' in his work. For, in a move well publicised in the national press, Ernő and Ursula decided to take up residence for two months in a top floor flat in Balfour upon its completion so as to conduct a very personalised form of post-occupancy evaluation, and to assist in the 'settling in' of public opinion surrounding the project. He described the need to experience first-hand through "direct observation" his design, to understand what it felt like to live in the flats, to wait for a lift, and to talk with tenants.<sup>32</sup> Generally this empirical approach was met with favourable responses from the press, the profession and the residents themselves, with some critiques fired at the potential naivety and paternalism of the architect in presuming in a few weeks what tenants might accumulate in a lifetime. Goldfinger reported his evaluations to the press in May 1968, foregrounded his concerns for "fundamental social consideration" alongside planning, management, defects and so on. He began: "The success of any scheme depends on the human factor - the relationship of people to each other and the frame to their daily life which the building provides."<sup>33</sup> He then proceeded to describe how toddlers and mothers were using the play areas, older people the clubrooms and so on. So although Goldfinger's legacy is certainly not typically cast as one of "fitting in" with the "mundane details of human existence,"<sup>34</sup> it does however seem that this gesture of residency was partly an attempt at just that.

When Goldfinger returned to Willow Road he felt, on balance, that the model was successful and repeatable (which he largely did at Trellick). However, flaws and failures commensurate with such a complex social and architectural project grew in number from the outset – including inadequate lift provision, and forbidding scale and anonymity in the sky decks that seemed to preclude much enthusiasm for community socialising. The Conservation Management Plan produced by Avanti Architects in 2007 makes a balanced assessment on the buildings shortcomings:

Some of the shortcomings of the design are due to the architect, but some cannot be. Savings were made at all stages of the design and construction process, to space standards, material specifications, and through reductions in servicing capacity. Additionally, issues such as rental policy, estate management and maintenance and integration of social facilities have all played a part. The buildings still house people, some in better conditions than others. The design is the work of a distinguished architect. The details were carefully considered and generally the building has worn better than many of its contemporaries.<sup>35</sup>

Importantly, at this time, external events and opinions were shifting rapidly away from tower estates as viable solutions for social housing provision; a shift that accelerated between the completion of Balfron in 1968 and then Trellick Tower and Robin Hood Gardens in 1972. In May 1968, the Ronan Point disaster wiped out most of the positive publicity for high-rise living that the Goldfinger's residency at Balfron had generated: a gas explosion in a kitchen caused major structural damage and five deaths. However as John Gold documents, the tide was already turning in the latter years of the 1960s, not just because of external events, lack of funding, public opinion and management issues, but also from within the architectural profession.<sup>36</sup>

In November 1967, for example, *The Architectural Review* published an issue on 'Housing and the Environment' in which assistant editor Nicholas Taylor mounted a bleak attack from within the ranks, and was contrary to Hubert de Cronin Hastings' editorial in the same issue that confidently endorsed architects' need to press on with rebuilding a "total environment" for new public housing. Taylor saw "beneath the Brutalist realism of Park Hill and the Swedish escapism of Roehampton," and into what he described as "alienation in the frustrated lift halls of new estates."<sup>37</sup> He criticised the hardness of texture, the "robust and the sculptural," the "overwhelming monumentality" and "generalised urbanity": "The architects seem to have been more interested in exposing their white aggregate than in expressing the multi-coloured individuality of the tenants."<sup>38</sup> And on the street deck as a substitute for collective and welcoming space he wrote: "many so-called deck schemes have merely narrow access balconies, dressed up under the fashionable post-Park-Hill name."<sup>39</sup> Taylor concluded with prescient condemnation: "but what is more important, if less easy to pinpoint, is the subjective hatred of the tenants for the rough-shuttered concrete that is thrust upon them."<sup>40</sup> Thus, by the end of the 1960s, it was clear that high-density council housing estate programmes could and did fail, and terms such as 'problem', 'difficult to let' and 'sink' came to describe them. And the failures would speak louder than the successes in the decades that followed.<sup>41</sup>

This shift between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s is also important in terms of the final section to follow in this paper which briefly charts the conservation twists and turns of fate and controversy surrounding both the Balfron Tower and Robin Hood Gardens in the last decade or more. Another way of expressing this cultural and social watershed between 1967 and 1972 may be through popular music. In 1967 Engelbert Humperdinck had three hits in the top ten singles charts in the United Kingdom. In 1972, two of the top five albums of the year in the UK were 'The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars' by David Bowie, and Deep Purple's 'Machine Head'. Although of course as Julian Barnes has acutely reminded, these perceptions of 'back then' are never as neat and tidy as they might appear in retrospect. He writes in *The Sense of an Ending* on that moment when the 1960s converged on the 1970s: "If you'll excuse the brief history lesson: most people didn't experience 'the Sixties' until the Seventies. Which meant, logically, that most people in the Sixties were still experiencing the Fifties – or, in my case, bits of both decades side by side. Which made things rather confusing."<sup>42</sup>

Yet it does seem that where Goldfinger still managed to be current, experimental and on the crest even, the Smithsons' Robin Hood Gardens was already late, with many stirrings of failure in the press and on the ground. Elain Harwood, for example, alerts readers to the series of compromises in the design process for Robin Hood Gardens, post-Ronan Point, and in the revision and adaptation of the street-deck solution from their Golden Lane competition entry of 1952 to a very different site: "A complex and controversial solution to a difficult brief that was completed only as slabs were becoming unpopular and prone to vandalism, Robin Hood Gardens was above all a very English answer to public housing with its streets in the sky and sculptural finesse..."<sup>43</sup>

But it would be very wrong to give the impression that Goldfinger's Balfron fared well either in the decades following its construction. Critiques are too many to summarise, and are fantastically archived already on the website project: 'www.balfrontower.org' by David Roberts. But as one taster, Sue Roalman wrote in the *East London Advertiser* on the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1978:

"The 400-odd residents of Balfron Towers in Poplar have something in common with Tory housing boss George Tremlett: they agree that high-rise living, at its worst, can be a ghastly and isolating experience ... Tiptoe through the mess beneath Balfron Towers and see the legacy your profession has left."<sup>44</sup> Other significant and very well documented political and governmental factors that contributed to the decline of the high-density estate included the increasing popularity of smaller housing associations boosted by the Housing Act of 1974, the ideologies of the Thatcher Government from 1979 to 1980 including the 'Right to Buy' policy,<sup>45</sup> and Prince Charles's populist attacks on British modern architecture including his infamous 'monstrous carbuncle' quote in a speech of 1984.

“Look away now, Prince Charles: Goldfinger is classic”<sup>46</sup>

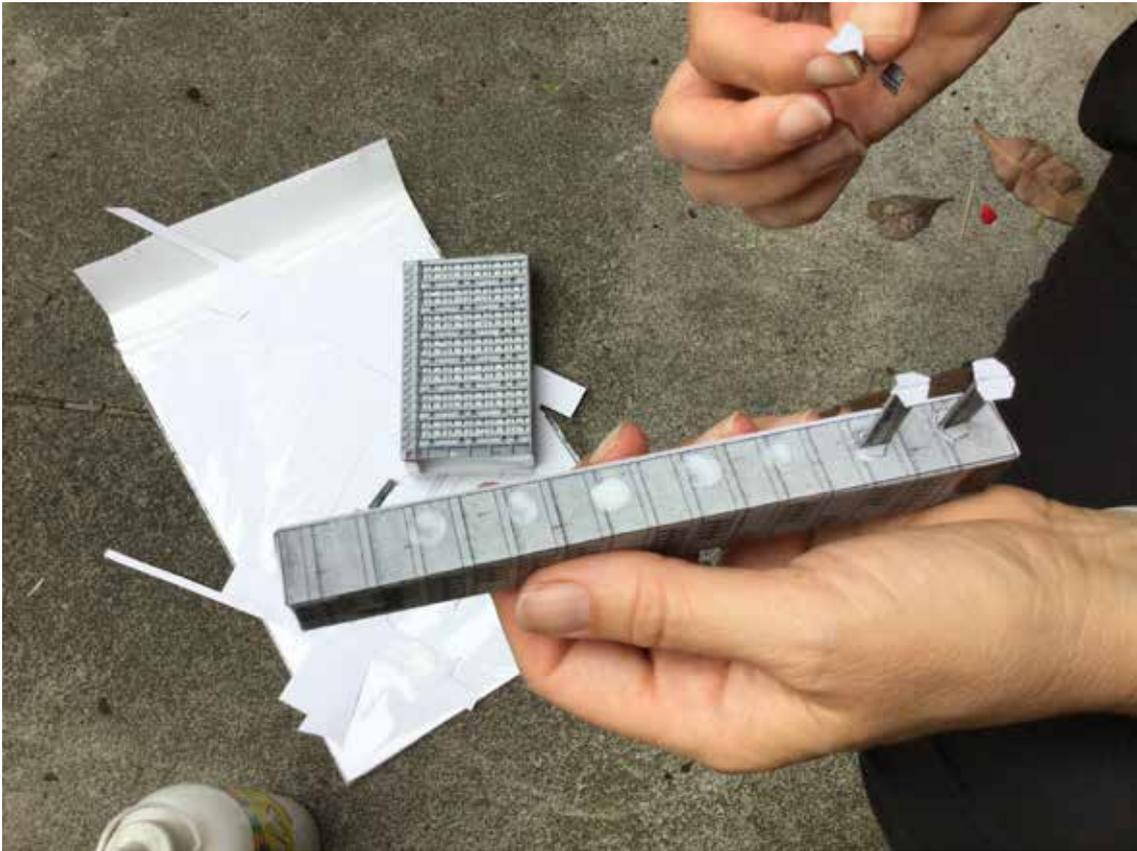


FIGURE 4 The Balfour Tower model under construction. Author

Writing about Goldfinger's Alexander Fleming House listing by English Heritage in 2013, Stephen Bayley goaded that, one day, Prince Charles would agree that Goldfinger now looked “rather wonderful.... This is because the one thing certain about taste is that it changes: what is reviled in one generation is revered in the next.”<sup>47</sup> Just as had happened in the case of High Victorian architecture some decades before, postwar Modernism would start to be slowly reassessed and re-valued anew. Thus although prominent and experimental estates such as Balfour, Trelick and Robin Hood Gardens became synonymous with poverty, neglect and violence, their reputation started to turn, spear-headed by a re-evaluation from within the architecture profession, and by heritage specialists and historians from the 1980s onwards.

Scholarly attention was also refocused on Goldfinger with James Dunnett and Gavin Stamp's monograph in 1983. This was followed by a steady stream of histories and biographies in the last two decades on brutalism and postwar modernism, including most recently Elain Harwood's weighty *Space, Hope and Brutalism*, and more popular and polemic commentary by Owen Hatherley and Jonathan Meades among others. Reflecting expert interest, conservation and history groups dedicated explicitly to understanding and promoting modern architecture's conservation were formed, including the Twentieth Century Society (founded as the Thirties Society in 1979) and DOCOMOMO International in 1988.

Heritage attention followed, with Goldfinger's house at Willow Road entrusted to the National Trust and conserved as their first Modern property in 1995. Balfour Tower received Grade II status listing in 1996, in a period of great energy in terms of documenting and listing postwar sites, as promoted in *Something Worth Keeping? Post-War Architecture in England*, 1996.<sup>48</sup> Other sites including Fleming House and Trelick Tower followed. Avanti Architects were commissioned to deliver a Conservation Management Plan for the Brownfield Estate, to assist the new owners Poplar Harca in proposing how the development would be conserved and regenerated for future viable housing

occupation, in light of heritage concerns now endowed on the listed buildings.<sup>49</sup> Avanti thoroughly examined the whole Brownfield Estate including all stages of housing blocks, and ancillary service buildings and spaces surrounding them, and urged that the estate be considered “holistically” and in a wider context as a “family group of sculptural forms.”<sup>50</sup> Many recommendations were made about the retention and maintenance of the original palette of materials and colours, a sense of visual consistency, the original fenestration and elevation structure and rhythm of form, interiors of apartments, and communal details including signage, tiling and marble in entry, lobbies and bridge areas so as to “cultivate a tradition of care” on the estate.<sup>51</sup> Importantly the plan recommended that social services and communal amenities were vital and should be reinstated “where appropriate to reflect the original design intent and character of the estate.”<sup>52</sup>

During the last two decades, media attention and popular tastemakers have also turned attention to the Brutalist cause, with countless articles and opinion pieces on the topic in newspapers, TV and more recently blogs.<sup>53</sup> Hatherley sees the V&A exhibition on Modernism in 2006 as a watershed moment when “the chattering classes rediscovered Modernism”, and re-embraced and affirmed Goldfinger in a flurry not witnessed since before the 1970s: “All manner of Notting Hill ‘trustafarians’ covet a flat in the one-time ‘tower of terror’, and it is laudable that he was finally proven right about the desirability of high-rise living.”<sup>54</sup>

Other recent publicity events at Balfron have included the photographer Simon Terrill’s (a ‘Balfronian’) staging of a time-lapse night image of the tower and all its inhabitants in 2010.<sup>55</sup> The National Trust, with Hemingway Design, curated a ‘pop-up’ event to reconstruct and exhibit a period flat (no 130) in 2014; “to communicate what life might have been like for residents of the flat circa 1968.”<sup>56</sup> There have been pop-up galleries, impromptu supper clubs and 24-hour theatre performances, an architectural symposium on the roof (“from which one artist also proposed to hurl a piano before her plan was damned as an act of crass lunacy”<sup>57</sup>). You can buy postcard pop-ups, tea-towels and plates with the Balfron and Trelick images tastefully printed on them. And both towers have been used as backdrops for countless film and fashion shoots including Prada, and a video by the band Omi Palone in 2015.<sup>58</sup> This has surely helped to re-make Goldfinger’s legacy in a new and far more rosy shade of bush-hammered concrete than recent decades had painted it.

**“Wayne Hemingway’s pop-up plan sounds the death knell for the legendary Balfron Tower”<sup>59</sup>**



FIGURE 5 The Balfron Tower model under construction. Author

In conclusion, to return to some questions raised at the outset of this paper and sparked by my visit. What of the current state of the Balfron and Robin Hood Gardens estate buildings today? The remaining tenants were decanted out of Balfron from 2008 onwards into other accommodation, and left hanging in uncertainty as to their right to return post-renovation.<sup>60</sup> In the interim, temporary occupants were drawn from local arts organisations with no security either as to their long-term tenancy. Current plans are in flux, but it appears that the owners of the tower, Poplar Harca, have announced that post-renovation - now slated as the total gutting of the interiors and major overhaul of facades, and disregard of the original social amenities and open-spaces surrounding the tower - the flats will be sold to private individuals to raise capital.<sup>61</sup>

Paradoxically, in contrast, Trellick tower in affluent Kensington remains in the majority social housing. While in the case of Robin Hood Gardens, despite huge media coverage and input from prominent academics, architects like Richard Rogers and Zaha Hadid, the Twentieth Century Society and descendants of the Smithsons, appeals to reconsider heritage listing were turned down again in 2015, and remaining social housing tenants presumably to be re-housed. Historic England (formerly English Heritage) on balance determined that, in contrast to Goldfinger's work and other modern public housing schemes such as Park Hill estate, Robin Hood Gardens does not make a compelling case for 'special interest' and architectural significance.<sup>62</sup> Although current dilapidation should make no impact on heritage deliberations, as Rowan Moore concludes: "Unlike many other much-criticised estates, Robin Hood Gardens never seems to have enjoyed a heyday. It was born into bad times – a period of economic decline in the East End when racist thuggery and racial tensions were rife. This, of course, was not its fault."<sup>63</sup> Neglect appears terminal and modern ruination of this bulky concrete mass on valuable land is not an option.<sup>64</sup>

So has all the buzz of popular attention really helped these buildings' cause? Oliver Wainwright writing in *The Guardian* doesn't think so:<sup>65</sup>

There are few places that provide such a vivid microcosm of London's gentrification as the Balfron Tower, Ernö Goldfinger's concrete cliff-face in Poplar ... As residents have battled their displacement, their plight has been framed against a backdrop of arts events, in a kind of live gentrification jamboree ... All the usual actors of regeneration have been paraded through the building, the artist-tenants performing their valiant role as the kamikaze agents of real estate "value uplift", enjoying a last hurrah on the deck of the brutalist Titanic.<sup>66</sup>

Despite all too easy chastisement by polemicists like Meades,<sup>67</sup> conservation debates over at least some postwar 'concrete monstrosities' are indeed shifting beyond total neglect and ignorance. However complex examples like Balfron and Robin Hood Gardens are, in different ways, still endangered of being loved or alternatively loathed to death. Joseph Watson of the National Trust asserts that Balfron Tower; "is the Welfare State in concrete. It deserves, nay demands, our attention."<sup>68</sup> However it is far more realistic to say that it was the Welfare State, and that the social values evident through the program and design of ancillary spaces were determined as integral to its architectural intentions and even to the heritage designation. Yet these social attributes are now inevitably compromised by future pragmatic and private redevelopment plans, cashing in on the drive of gentrification and the newfound cultural cachet of Brutalism. Wainwright again powerfully describes Balfron's possible future as "the zombie corpse of the Welfare State...eviscerated of its original social purpose."<sup>69</sup>

If one returns to the original paradox inherent in the postwar defensive articulation of social vision, perhaps it will be ultimately settled by removing the former social vision altogether, in favour of an exclusively defensive form signifying a new kind of resident. In that case perhaps demolition, as in the case of Robin Hood Gardens, makes for an apt alternative ending to the story of social housing experimentation? Goldfinger died in 1987, and one can't help wonder what he would have made of all the attention.

## Endnotes

- 1 Words from The Clientele, 'Losing Haringey', from *Strange Geometry*, 2005.
- 2 Rowan Moore, 'Robin Hood Gardens: don't knock it down' in *The Guardian*, 5 December, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/dec/05/robin-hood-gardens-east-london> (accessed May 2015).
- 3 Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Penguin, 2003), 42.
- 4 Gavin Stamp, "Ernö Goldfinger – The Early Years" in James Dunnett and Gavin Stamp, *Ernö Goldfinger* (London:

- Architectural Association, 1983), 9.
- 5 Nigel Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger: The life of an architect* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.
  - 6 Willow Road was ahead of its time and was still seen as thoroughly new in the 1950s.
  - 7 Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger* (London: Coronet, 1989), 21.
  - 8 Nigel Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger: The life of an architect* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.
  - 9 Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger*, 4.
  - 10 Apparently people used to make prank calls to his family singing the Bond theme song.
  - 11 Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger*, 153.
  - 12 Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger*, 3, citing Brian Sewell, *Daily Sketch*, 1937.
  - 13 'The Skyscrapers Over London', *The Sunday Times*, 10 July, 1960.
  - 14 Robert Elwall, *Ernö Goldfinger, RIBA Drawings and Photographs*, No. 3 (London: Academy Editions, 1996), 18.
  - 15 Elain Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism* (London: The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2015), 49.
  - 16 *Balfon Tower, Flat 130 Balfon Tower* (London: National Trust, 2014), 6.
  - 17 Avanti Architects, 'Conservation Management Plan: The Brownfield Estate, Poplar', 2007, Vol. 1, 36-7.
  - 18 Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger*, 155.
  - 19 Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger*, 156.
  - 20 James Dunnett, "A Terrible Beauty" in James Dunnett and Gavin Stamp, *Ernö Goldfinger* (London: Architectural Association, 1983) 7.
  - 21 Dunnett, "A Terrible Beauty", 7.
  - 22 Vanbrugh's Seaton Delaval Hall of 1728.
  - 23 Dunnett, "A Terrible Beauty", 7.
  - 24 Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (London: Zero Books, 2008), 18.
  - 25 Ernő Goldfinger published three articles in *The Architecture Review*, 'The Sensation of Space', 'Urbanism and Spatial Order', and 'The Elements of Enclosed Space' between 1941-42 (accessed <https://www.architecture.com/WhatsOn/Early2014/PerspectivesonArchitectureArchitecturalSpaceintheWorkofErnC3%B6Goldfinger.aspx>, 2016).
  - 26 Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 103.
  - 27 Forty, *Words and Buildings*, 104.
  - 28 Ernő Goldfinger, "Balfon Tower," *East London Papers*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Summer 1969): 37.
  - 29 Warburton, *Ernö Goldfinger*, 161 citing Goldfinger in *The East London Advertiser*, 1 March 1968.
  - 30 Dunnett, "A Terrible Beauty", 7.
  - 31 Ernő Goldfinger, letter dated 12 March 1968, quoted in <http://www.balfrontower.org/document/5/riba-archive-records> (accessed December 2015)
  - 32 Ernő Goldfinger, "Rowlett Street Housing Press Conference" on 14 May 1968. Accessed: <http://www.balfrontower.org/document/5/riba-archive-records>
  - 33 Ernő Goldfinger, "Rowlett Street Housing Press Conference" on 14 May 1968. Accessed: <http://www.balfrontower.org/document/5/riba-archive-records>
  - 34 Avanti, 'Conservation Management Plan', 81.
  - 35 Avanti, 'Conservation Management Plan', 81.
  - 36 John R. Gold, *The Practice of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 270.
  - 37 N. Taylor, "The Failure of Housing," *Architectural Review*, vol. 142 (1967): 342.
  - 38 Taylor, "The Failure of Housing": 342.
  - 39 Taylor, "The Failure of Housing": 343.
  - 40 Taylor, "The Failure of Housing": 341.
  - 41 Cristina Cerulli, "What Now?" in *Estate* (London: Myrdle Court Press, 2010), 124-9.
  - 42 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 40.
  - 43 Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism*, 84.

- 44 <http://www.balfrontower.org/> (accessed, January 2016).
- 45 Cerulli, "What Now?", 121.
- 46 Stephen Bayley, "Look Away Prince Charles, Goldfinger's Tower is wonderful," *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 July 2013.
- 47 Bayley, "Look Away Prince Charles, Goldfinger's Tower is wonderful," 2013.
- 48 English Heritage, *Something Worth Keeping?*, London, English Heritage, 1996.
- 49 Avanti, 'Conservation Management Plan', 27.
- 50 Avanti, 'Conservation Management Plan', 9.
- 51 Avanti, 'Conservation Management Plan', 9.
- 52 Avanti, 'Conservation Management Plan', 11.
- 53 Just one example: Jonathan Glancey, 'Concrete facts: Why Brutalism is Back', *The Guardian*, 18 February, 2000. Blogs: <http://fuckyeahbrutalism.tumblr.com/>; <http://britishbrutalistarchitecture.blogspot.com.au/>; <https://ettubrutalism.wordpress.com/>
- 54 Hatherley, *Militant Modernism*, 15.
- 55 <http://simonterill.com/Balfron-Project>
- 56 Joseph Watson, "Towering Ambitions: Balfron Tower and the National Trust" in *Balfron Tower, Flat 130 Balfron Tower* (London: National Trust, 2014), 1.
- 57 Oliver Wainwright, "Wayne Hemingway's pop-up plan sounds the death knell for the legendary Balfron Tower," *The Guardian*, 26 September 2014.
- 58 <http://www.dezeen.com/2015/01/17/omi-palone-brutalist-landmarks-london-music-video-architecture/> (Accessed 16 December, 2015). Also in 2015 the RIBA, Assemble and Simon Terrill created a Brutalist playground exhibition. While the immensely popular online game Minecraft and the RIBA launched a Brutalist-inspired design competition.
- 59 Wainwright, "Wayne Hemingway's pop-up plan sounds the death knell for the legendary Balfron Tower."
- 60 <http://www.balfrontower.org/> (accessed, January 2016).
- 61 See latest from James Dunnett, "Historic England is failing in its mission," *Opinion* (6 January 2016) (accessed <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/opinion/dunnett-historic-england-is-failing-in-its-mission/10001209.article>).
- 62 On this decision, see John Allan, "Robin Hood Gardens, Poplar, London," *Conservation Bulletin* (Issue 59, Autumn 2008): 20-21.
- 63 <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/robin-hood-gardens-poplar-presence-dignity-and-a-bit-grim/>
- 64 Douglas Murphy, *The Architecture of Failure* (London: Zero Books, 2012), 2.
- 65 Wainwright, "Wayne Hemingway's pop-up plan sounds the death knell for the legendary Balfron Tower."
- 66 Wainwright, "Wayne Hemingway's pop-up plan sounds the death knell for the legendary Balfron Tower."
- 67 Jonathan Meades, "Fuck E\*\*lish Heritage," *Museum Without Walls* (London: Unbound Press, 2013), 145.
- 68 Watson, "Towering Ambitions: Balfron Tower and the National Trust", 1.
- 69 Wainwright, "Wayne Hemingway's pop-up plan sounds the death knell for the legendary Balfron Tower."