



Weds 8 and Thurs 9 March 2023, Cinema 1

Architecture on Film: Robin Hood Gardens [UK Premiere] + The Smithsons on Housing + ScreenTalk

The Smithsons on Housing (UK, 1970, B.S. Johnson, 28 mins) *Thanks to the BFI National TV Archive*
Robin Hood Gardens [UK Premiere] (Germany, 2022, Thomas Beyer, Adrian Dorschner, 90 mins)

A reflection on the legacy of one of the 20th century's most contested and emblematic buildings – from the time of its conception to its afterlife – across two films separated by the building's life cycle of 50 years. Followed by discussion with *Robin Hood Gardens* filmmakers **Thomas Beyer** and **Adrian Dorschner**, chaired, on 8 March, by **Vicky Richardson** (Head of Architecture and Heinz Curator, Royal Academy of Arts), and, on 9 March, by **Ellis Woodman**, (Director, Architecture Foundation).

Programme Notes, by Vicky Richardson

Thomas Beyer and Adrian Dorschner's documentary *Robin Hood Gardens* (2022) marked the 50th anniversary of the completion of one of the most significant urban designs of the twentieth century. This beautiful and perceptive film will be a vital record of the controversial debate that dogged the East London building since it was designed by Alison and Peter Smithson in the 1960s. Arguments about the merit and perceived failure of the building raged in the run up to its partial demolition in 2017, and continued with the announcement that the V&A Museum would acquire a section of the building for its collection.

Despite the scarring experience of Modernist housing in the UK, the period of optimism only existed in Britain for a relatively brief period – we can perhaps date it from the Housing Subsidy Act of 1956 to the energy crisis of 1973. The beginning of this period is also marked by the Whitechapel Gallery's influential exhibition inspired by the idea of modern living, *This is Tomorrow* (1956), which the Smithsons were part of, in a collaboration with fellow members of the Independent Group, Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson.

The film is then a story of not just one building, but an investigation into the tensions and dilemmas of the Modernist urban project. Through the rise and fall of Robin Hood Gardens we can grapple with the whole project of progressive urbanism, which has divided people for many years.

This has been a labour of love for Beyer and Dorschner, who began making the film in 2015. They started with a conversation with photographer H  l  ne Binet, who appears at moments throughout the film on site in East London as she documents the building ahead of the demolition of the West block. Binet connected the pair with other critics and the voices became a kind of 'avalanche' as they travelled around the world gathering evidence. They spoke to residents of Robin Hood Gardens as well as historians, architects and the Smithson's children Soraya and Simon Smithson, charting the transformation of the place from a living community of 216 homes, through demolition, and finally its memorialisation at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018. For many it is a story of betrayal, loss and the attempt to unfairly attribute blame. But skilfully handled by Beyer and Dorschner, who introduce wise commentators to analyse the conditions and context of Robin Hood Gardens, the film tells the story in a way that is sympathetic but also realistic.

Above all the film gives us a unique insight to the work and ideas of its architects. Valuing 'the ordinary' and 'the found', their approach reconciled the optimism of modernity with the desire to engage with what we inherit. Former employee of the Smithsons, architect Christopher Woodward, is a surprise star of the film (along with his cat Hans). Woodward, who passed away in September

2022, speaks with characteristic wit and intelligence about being taught by the Smithsons at the Architectural Association and going on to work for them in the 1960s.

The film feels like a memorial to other key figures in architecture who are no longer with us – Richard Rogers and Charles Jencks, for example. As we watch a section of the façade of Robin Hood Gardens arrive at Venice’s Tronchetto terminal in an articulated lorry, it’s as if it were a giant hearse on its way to a funeral.

We then see the crates of concrete fragments being transferred to a barge for onward transit to the Arsenale, and their reconstruction as an exhibit mounted by the V&A. At the time, under the guidance of curator Dr Neil Bingham, the Museum was saving a three-storey section, including the exterior façades and interiors of an interlocking pair of maisonette flats, with the hope of future generations being able to walk through a lost masterpiece. Unfortunately, most of this was recently destroyed by the museum and only a section of façade and the lobbies of the flats were accessioned into the collection, so as to be more easily displayed at the V&A Storehouse opening next year at Here East. The fact that the museum discarded so much of the original acquisition in favour of the folly of façadism, seems to confirm that this period of architectural history is now valued chiefly just for its Brutalist style.

But the Smithsons had a more significant vision and a brave client in the Greater London Council. Interviews with them, which are taken from the shorter documentary also being screened, *The Smithsons on Housing* (1970), are fascinating and make one realise that many of the concepts they pioneered have become common parlance among today’s architects and ‘placemakers’: the idea of a place having an identity, or the found character of a place. They were pioneering in their efforts to understand the nature of the site and its connections to the history and future life of this part of London, including the docks, industrial structures and shipping routes.

From the standpoint of a society that finds it impossible to plan on an ambitious scale, or to provide adequate housing for people, or to really have any positive vision for the future, it’s important not to read history backwards. The Smithsons were not to know that by 1973 there would be an energy crisis that would trigger inflation and recession, and that by 1979 the era of public housing – where more than one third of the British people lived in council housing – would shift with the introduction of ‘right to buy’. The fate of Robin Hood Gardens was not intrinsic to its design, or even to its unprepossessing site. History could have played out differently, and circumstances were beyond the GLC and the architects’ control – a point that comes across strongly in the film.

Beyer and Dorschner invite us to mourn the loss of Robin Hood Gardens, but without nostalgia they help us to understand its place in history – the product of a brief period when there were opportunities for young architects to take responsibility for decisions on a grand scale and to implement ambitious ideas.

Thomas Beyer, born in Leipzig, 1983, studied Journalism and Geography in Leipzig. He has a background as a journalist, director and trainer and is a commissioning editor for German TV.

Adrian Dorschner, born in Leipzig, 1981, studied Architecture in Dresden, Barcelona and Zurich. He is working as an architect and filmmaker and is teaching at Architekturwerkstatt St.Gallen, Switzerland.

Vicky Richardson is Head of Architecture and Heinz Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts. She is co-curating Herzog & de Meuron, opening at the RA on 15 July, and in 2021 curated Light Lines: the architectural photographs of Hélène Binet.

Architecture on Film is curated by Justin Jaeckle, on behalf of **The Architecture Foundation**, in partnership with the **Barbican Centre**. Tonight’s screening is kindly supported by the **Swiss Embassy in the UK**.

Forthcoming Architecture on Film screenings:

Reichsautobahn (Hartmut Bitomsky, Federal Republic of Germany, 1984, 91 mins) **Weds 24 May, 18.45**

“Where Germany ends,” said Hitler, “the potholes can begin”. Bitomsky’s piercing essay film narrates its web of images to critically excavate Germany’s “biggest edifice”: 3,870 km of Nazi-built autobahn.

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