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Heritage Protection as Progressive Urbanism? Modernist Social Housing in England

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Abstract: Heritage protection can sometimes disrupt the remaking and reimagining of cities by prioritising and protecting alternatives based on non-market values of architectural and historical significance. In England, the “post-war listing” programme has positioned state heritage protection as an unlikely advocate and defender (sometimes of last resort) of the diminishing material and symbolic legacy of the architecture of the welfare state and its socialist values from the 1950s and 1960s. In this paper, we explore what might be at stake ideologically, materially, and symbolically in the protection of post-war architectural heritage in England. While post-war listing has created scope for alternatives, its subaltern role (in and against the state) has been limited in various ways by state strategies of market-based regeneration that erode and marginalise social housing and welfarist rights to the city. Although heritage protection has been only a minor irritant in the politics of regeneration, the paper explores what might be at stake for the Left in engaging more explicitly with heritage building protection and the selectivity of heritage value.

Keywords: heritage, housing, resistance, neoliberal, elite, right to the city

Introduction

State conservation of cultural built heritage is not usually associated with socially progressive urbanism. Rooted in elite expert judgement and often reinforced by heritage discourses that are socially conservative (Smith 2006), heritage status is more often associated with the protection and gentrification of elite landscapes and values. Equally, legal protection of built heritage has long been a frustration for developers and pro-development interests because in principle it prioritises architectural or historical significance over market considerations (Robertson 2008; Toogood and Neate 2013). This raises the question, what happens when the remit to protect architectural or historical significance cuts across other pressures and demands within and outside government; when heritage might be politically challenging, “subaltern” (Smith 2006), or simply an impediment to elite interests?

In this article we examine a particular manifestation of social struggle involving the UK state's extended role in protecting cultural built heritage, notably what happens when the conservation logic of protecting elements of "post-war" (i.e. 1950s–1970s) modernist social housing meets powerful public and private interests in market-based estate regeneration and urban gentrification. At the heart of our paper is the decision in England in 1987 to extend the range of buildings of cultural built heritage that might be protected (or "listed") to any building at least 30 years old (and ten years old in exceptional cases). Prior to 1987, listing protection was restricted to structures built before 1939. Crucially, the removal of the 1939 ceiling required cultural built heritage policy to engage with a period when architectural and urban planning innovation was dominated not by elites, but rather by the priority given to social housing and other public infrastructures in the post-war Welfare State (Blom et al. 2016; Harwood and Davies 2015; While 2007).

Advocacy for the "Architecture of Social Intent" (AOSI) (Bayley 2002) was always likely to be politically and socially uncomfortable because the post-war modernism had long been derided for its uncompromising "form follows function" aesthetic and perceived social and material failings, with limited recognition that failed housing was compounded if not caused by decades of diminished state support for social housing, poor maintenance, and politically motivated subsidies for home ownership. Although much social housing of the AOSI had been demolished or remodelled by the early 1990s, many buildings had survived because of the prohibitive costs of demolition and the limited funding for market-led regeneration. Rising demand for urban housing, especially in London, and strategies of "urban renaissance" across England from the 1990s onwards meant that notable examples of buildings left standing were increasingly cast by governments and other development interests as unwanted remnants of the past and a barrier to progress and profit (Mould 2017).

We therefore examine how post-war listing was positioned within the politics of (neoliberal) urban development in England. As we demonstrate, in some cases listed building protection was something of a potential last line of defence against the loss of social housing through "estate regeneration", though there were also examples where listing itself was exploited to support the market re-valorisation and gentrification of 1960s social housing. More symbolically, struggles over post-war listing in England might be seen as part of a wider struggle against the wider political project of effacing the material legacy of welfare state urbanism and the alternatives it might represent in the future (cf. Krivy 2022). The "30 years rule" introduced in 1987 gave English Heritage the remit and legitimacy to protect architecturally or historically significant post-war modernist buildings based on objective assessment that, in principle, should sit above governmental priorities and economic (and social) interests. However, the resistant or "counter hegemonic" role for UK historic building conservation was ultimately limited by the power of governments to override heritage considerations in favour of privatised solutions and the limited wider public support for post-war heritage and the protection of social housing.

Drawing on contrasting examples from London and Newcastle upon Tyne, we explore how the outcomes of post-war heritage conservation policy have been shaped by state investment priorities and the (un)profitability of particular sites in a context where “estate regeneration” has been underwritten by conversion to owner occupied housing. The paper is based on a range of research undertaken over many decades, notably: (a) a UK research council-funded project on the post-war listing programme (British Academy grant number SG-36230), and follow-up research, that included interviews with organisations and individuals involved in the heritage designation and regeneration of Robin Hood Gardens; and (b) over 20 years of collaborative engagement with community groups and heritage organisations in Byker, including living memory projects, interviews with local and national actors, support for community-based initiatives, and co-publication with local stakeholders. The paper begins by looking critically at historic building conservation as a potential site of resistance in development politics, before examining the political stakes in the conservation of UK post-war social housing. The next two sections look in more detail at the relationship between conservation decisions and the outcomes of estate regeneration in Byker (Newcastle) and Robin Hood Gardens (London). The conclusions reflect on the differential outcomes of protection-regeneration in the two case studies, and also reflect on whether and how progressive politics might benefit from a closer engagement with listing building protection.

Cultural Built Heritage, Elitism, and Development Politics

Historically the conservation and protection of built heritage has been a rarified and selective activity (Boyer 1996; Smith 2006) that tends to reflect and reinforce elite interests. This is enshrined in policy making as decisions about what to protect and in what form, reflecting an Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) that privileges “monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building” (Smith 2006:11). Critical to Smith’s (2006) concept of the AHD are the power relations that heritage embodies, and the way that the AHD is used to close down possible heritages, or subaltern heritages (see also Smith 2010; Water-ton 2010). At the heart of Smith’s critique is the control over definitions of heritage and subsequent management practices exerted by conservation elites, professional and otherwise, to the exclusion of other voices.

There is also a long history of built heritage being mobilised to serve market interests in land and property, and the role of heritage in the gentrification of residual urban spaces is now well documented, with conservation becoming an important point of reference in cultural distinction (Bourdieu 2010) around the world. As Butler (1997:109) argues:

The fight to maintain the status quo and an image for the future is therefore firmly rooted in the expropriation of the past. It is also often the means whereby a class of people with this “cultural capital” can come together to protect “historical

authenticity” and, at the same time, fight for their future. In other words the fight for preservation is a focus for relatively isolated middle-class people to unite together to promote their individual and collective interests.

The “rent gap” (Smith 1987) that is exploited by gentrification can often draw on unrealised heritage value (Lees 2014; Wilson 2004), backed up by state heritage protection that cements and protects investment in remade middle-class living space. Conservation-led gentrification prices less affluent residents out of prime urban spaces, transforming working-class spaces—and working-class histories—in the process.

Yet the practice of protecting (or seeking to protect) the built environment is also in principle a counter to the exploitation of land solely for profit. At its root, conservation asserts (in principle at least) the importance of values beyond the maximisation of profit and exchange value and, crucially, that these “timeless” values may be mobilised in resistance to decisions about utility in the present. Indeed, there can be considerable criticism of the idea of conservation from property owners, developers, and growth interests concerned that heritage impedes development and the remaking of the city in the most efficient and profitable way (Healey et al. 2002).

Heritage designation remains an important legal restriction on rights to develop land and, as such, heritage status has the potential to disrupt prevailing processes of capital accumulation. Such a disruption might have long-term consequences or might be temporary as the market reformulates its ideas about how urban space can be made profitable. For example, the resistance by an alliance of local interests (residents and small traders) and conservationists to the Greater London Council’s plans in the early 1970s to redevelop Covent Garden is a talismanic story of early British conservation success (Delafons 1997; Home and Loew 1987). However, resistance to comprehensive redevelopment did not ultimately impinge on the attractiveness of the area to the real-estate market, with the ensuing process of gentrification of retained and refurbished buildings leading to the dispersal of working-class residents and small businesses (Anson 1981). Heritage protection can prevent redevelopment, but does not in itself protect existing use value. State conservation by no means seeks to support an emancipatory urbanism through its systems of heritage protection, but in the spaces afforded in these processes there is the potential for a variety of politics to be deployed; and there is thus always the potential (latent or realised) for the expression of oppositional cultures (Robertson 2008) and, indeed, for state conservation to be a subaltern space for celebrating urban histories and protecting the spaces of marginalised groups (Dubrow 1998; Hayden 1995; Pendlebury et al. 2004).

Thus, whilst the apparatus of state-heritage protection might be regarded as an elite activity, it does not mean that elite outcomes are a foregone conclusion in its implementation. Heritage *can* be mobilised to support capital accumulation, but it can also act to *disrupt* these processes as part of struggles over land use. The point is that conservation is potentially a subaltern (Smith 2006) or resistant instrument (a protected sphere) in the logic of capitalist land use and the search for profit depending on the remit of conservation designation and the strength of

its application. It is in this context that we now turn to the post-war AOSI and its protection.

The Post-War Architecture of Social Intent as an Expression of Socialist Value

In the UK and other countries, during the 1950s and 1960s there was a particular overlap between modernist architectural style and a social progressive politics of housing (Hatherley 2011; Mould 2017). Gaining ground in architectural and planning education and thinking during the 1930s, modernism in various forms became the dominant architectural form of the post-war era. This was not just about commitments to the use of new materials (notably concrete) to create buildings of space and light, but also political commitments to addressing disadvantage and inequality through better quality social housing (Gold 1998). As Hatherley (2011:87) argues, concrete brutalism “was a political aesthetic, an attitude, a weapon, dedicated to the precept that nothing was too good for ordinary people”. In the UK the ideological commitments of modernist architecture and planning overlapped with the post-war political commitment to creating a post-war welfare state, underpinned by large-scale investment in social housing and urban renewal by national government and local authorities (Bullock 2002; Gold 2007). From the 1950s until the 1970s, social housing was a central focus of the architectural profession in the UK, with local authorities in large cities such as London creating large architectural departments to work on well-funded public sector projects with scope for experimentation (Bullock 2002; Gold 2007). Often (but not exclusively) social housing and other public infrastructure were unashamedly modernist, including austere forms, such as brutalism. What followed was a significant programme of social housing investment and slum clearance. In many cities the AOSI was a highly visible statement of the principles of collective intervention, with social housing given prime and prominent sites rather than being relegated to the margins of the city. The architects of the AOSI might have been resolutely middle class, but its practices and principles were about improving living conditions for the working class within a broader context of collective growth and prosperity.

Not all of the social housing of the AOSI of the 1950s and 1960s was socially or structurally successful or well thought through. There were many examples of material failings. By the 1970s there was already a strong social and cultural backlash against landmark social housing from the 1950s and 1960s and more generally against the planning and architectural ethos and principles of that era (Bullock 2002). In part, that backlash reflected the material failings and social problems of some of the buildings and the shift away from planning principles of large-scale, car-based development. But it also reflected a shift in societal priorities, including the erosion of principles of state (and thus societal) commitment to social housing and towards a market-based reworking of urban space. More broadly, the architecture of the 1950s and 1960s became part of a broader critique and undermining of principles of socialist and collective value. The better social architecture of the 1950s–1970s was concerned with material

improvements in living space and the expression of pride in social housing on prime urban sites, in a way that stands in stark contrast with the subsequent scaling back of social housing provision in the UK (Hatherley 2011, 2012; Hodkinson 2011; Hodkinson et al. 2013). Material improvements in living space were generally reflected in generous space standards for living and open space and well-located sites within the city.

The post-war modernist project is complicated from the perspective of class politics. Architecture was an elite activity, and modernist social housing can be seen as in some respects an imposition of elite perspectives based on idealised conceptions of working-class life (see, for example, Gold 2007; Thoburn 2022). Nevertheless, as suggested above, elite imposition on tenants and communities—in the past, present, and future—is contingent on the nature and contribution of individual buildings and their contexts. Indeed, it is possible that post-war listing might be seen as progressive or empowering if it can sustain or enhance affordable housing, perhaps more so if devalued post-war modernist structures have become a refuge for people and activities marginalised within a built environment that is increasingly privatised and controlled to serve commercial interests (Minton 2017). It is in this context that conservation of the AOSI is also a question about whether and how the state would protect (and perhaps celebrate) this symbolic legacy and what it might mean for its material legacy as a bastion of social housing. Literature has also shown how residents and community associations have mobilised around listed modernist structures in defence of social value (see Farmer and Pendlebury 2013; Toogood and Neate 2013).

An important part of the “heritagisation” of the AOSI has been to differentiate between the good and the bad, and to tell a more nuanced story of its urban legacy. This includes a better understanding of the spiral of decline of poor maintenance and building neglect and social decline as social rented housing became increasingly positioned as a residual minimal safety net for the poor (Hodkinson et al. 2013). The story of the decline of social housing estates in the AOSI is in large part a story about the erosion of social rented housing in England. The argument is that the physical artefacts of the AOSI were (and are) a symbol of an approach to urbanism (and the right to the city)—a repository of collective or socialist value—that by the 1980s had been replaced by marketised urban forms and the increasing marginalisation of less affluent populations. Krivy (2022) makes a similar argument in respect of moves to deride, remodel, and replace socialist collective housing in Eastern Europe, which is read as part of a post-socialist cleansing of political context and alternatives. In the UK, the collective social housing of the post-war welfare state (modernist or otherwise) has been eroded since the 1980s by a lack of investment and political support and political programmes that favour individual private home ownership, including giving state social housing residents the “right to buy” their homes, and the private rental sector, and effectively a new rentier class.

Subsequent regeneration strategies for large social housing estates (and modernist buildings) have involved various processes of demolition, redevelopment, and remodelling that have often led to (and been underwritten by and implicitly or explicitly seeking to achieve) the replacement of relatively secure and

affordable rented housing with private housing. By 2010, a number of large-scale modernist housing schemes and estates from the 1950s and 1960s had become bastions of affordable social housing largely because they were too difficult or unprofitable to refurbish. From the early 2000s, a renewed push in national policy for estate renewal by successive national governments (buoyed by profitable urban land markets) led to increased pressure on what was left of the AOSI; an assault on social housing, characterised as “class war conservatism” (Hodkinson and Robbins 2012) and “state-led gentrification” (Lees 2014):

rather than a view of the welfare state as having a broad application in various forms to many citizens, it is a grudging view whereby a minimal state provides a minimal provision for citizens who are deemed to have failed, but moreover it actively creates conditions that, having fallen into the poverty trap, there is little prospect of escaping. (Pendlebury and Haley 2021:59)

The neglect and denigration of the AOSI and its residents was most graphically illustrated in the criminal tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire in one of the most affluent boroughs of London in June 2017, when 72 people lost their lives as fire swept through a social housing high-rise that had been clad in flammable panels (see MacLeod 2018).

UK Historic Building Protection and the AOSI

The English system of listing buildings for special protection on architectural or historical grounds was introduced in the early 1940s to help guide decisions about reconstruction in redevelopment. Decisions about national listing (graded as Grade I, Grade II*, or Grade II indicating architectural significance) are made by the government minister working with Historic England, the government agency for protecting and promoting the historic environment (called English Heritage until 2015). Listed buildings can be substantially modified or demolished, but consent is required for any change that would affect its “special interest”. Permission for change to the fabric of a listed building is a matter of negotiation between the initiators of change (owners, developers), regulators (local authorities, Historic England) with input from others (e.g. residents, amenity bodies such as the Twentieth Century Society) and focus on judgements of architectural value, practicality (e.g. in terms of cost or functionality), and the wider benefit of development. Listing does not control how buildings are used, though that can be shaped by decisions about changes to the building fabric.

When the system of English listed building protection was first established, it was largely restricted to buildings built before 1840, subsequently extended to pre-1939 buildings in 1970 (Stamp 1996). The decision to extend listed status in the 1980s was triggered by the proposed demolition of Bracken House in the City of London (designed by Albert Richardson, built 1955–58), which was classical rather than modernist in design. Without a convenient cut-off point for listing, English Heritage together with conservation organisations such as The Thirties Society (called the Twentieth Century Society since 1992) persuaded the government to introduce the “Thirty Years Rule” in 1987, creating a constant roll

forward of listing potential for any building more than 30 years old (though more recent buildings can also be protected if they are threatened and deemed to be “outstanding”).

The Thirty Years Rule reflected the established logic of the listing process despite the potential challenges of protecting relatively recent and difficult buildings. Mindful of the potential for controversy, listing of post-war buildings was initially based on systematic national assessments of potential cases, which were not always accepted by government—indeed, only 17 of the initial 80 recommendations were accepted, with a focus on relatively uncontroversial buildings such as Coventry Cathedral (Basil Spence, 1956–62, Grade I) or the Royal Festival Hall (Matthew, Martin and Moro, 1948–51, Grade I) (While 2007). However, led by the advocacy of the government statutory advisor, listed protection quickly extended to thematic surveys of social housing. In 1993, the Alexandra Road Estate in North London (Camden Architects’ Department, 1972–78, Grade II*) and Keeling House in East London (Denys Lasdun, 1954–57, Grade II*) were the first post-1945 council housing projects to be listed. Significant numbers of modernist housing estates were subsequently listed. Post-war listing did not necessarily follow government political affiliation but ebbed and flowed with individual government ministers and the timing of thematic assessments undertaken by English Heritage (While 2007; see Table 1).

The extension of listed building protection to welfare state architecture from the 1950s to the 1970s was controversial at national and local levels, with a continuing hostility to underpinning principles. For those on the Right and Left, post-war listing was seen as a potential constraint on much-needed regeneration and redevelopment, while increasing the cost of maintenance and management. Conversely, there were concerns that listing status might itself lead to gentrification and displacement of poorer residents by conferring a marketable status on neglected buildings.

The outcomes of post-war listing have been varied. Politics intervenes and there are examples of buildings where strong lobbying for listing has been unsuccessful and demolition has followed, or where there has been significant remodelling of building and changes in tenure that have arguably compromised both tangible and intangible heritage value. In cases such as Park Hill in Sheffield (1957–61, listed Grade II* in 1998), there have been major changes in the building fabric and significant shifts from social rented tenure to majority market owner occupation (Bell 2011). In other cases, the “heritage dividend” of post-war listing has itself supported gentrification through change of tenure of post-war social housing. Examples include Keeling House in East London (completed in 1957, listed Grade II* in 1993, converted into luxury apartments between 1999 and 2001) (see While 2007) and Balfron Tower (Erno Goldfinger, 1963, a 26-storey residential tower listed in 1996 at Grade II and then at higher Grade II* in 2015), also in East London. Despite promises for existing residents to remain or return to Balfron when the stock was transferred from the local authority to the Poplar HARCA housing association, the subsequent strategy was to refurbish for sale, with arguments of “failure” and the additional costs of refurbishment to “heritage standards” used as the rationale for displacement (Roberts 2017).

Table 1: Post-war listed mass public housing in England in chronological order of first listing

Name	Location	Attributed designer	Date	Description/ ownership before listing	Grade	Listed	After listing
Alexandra Road Estate & Loudoun Road	London	Camden Architects' Department (Neave Brown) & Tom Kay	1972–78	Low-rise, high-density "street" and adjacent later phase. Local authority.	II*/II	18/8/1993, 11/2/2016	Retained as majority social housing.
Keeling House	London	Fry, Drew, Drake & Lasdun	1957–59	16-storey cluster block. Local authority.	II*	23/11/1993	Sold to private developer and converted to luxury apartments.
Balfour Tower (BT), Carradale House (CH), Glenkerry House (GH)	London	Erno Goldfinger	1965–67, 1967–68, 1972–75	26-, 11- and 14-storey blocks of flats. Local authority.	II/II*	14/3/1996, 4/12/2000, 15/10/2015	Transferred to HARCA (housing association) in 2007. BT refurbished as luxury apartment owner occupation. CH and GH retained as social housing, although with RTB.
Golden Lane Estate	London	Chamberlain, Powell and Bon	1953–63	Substantial mixed housing estate. Local authority.	II/II*	4/12/1997	Local authority ownership, 50:50 public private because of right to buy.
Park Hill	Sheffield	Sheffield City Architects' Department (Jack Lynn & Ivor Smith)	1957–61	Large pioneering deck access scheme of flats and maisonettes. Local authority.	II*	22/12/1998	Part-privatised and regenerated through consortium of private developer, local authority, and housing association. Change in tenure to majority owner-occupied.
The Lawn	Harlow	Frederick Gibberd	1950–51	9-storey block of flats. Local authority.	II	22/12/1998	Local authority. Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.

(continued)

Table 1: (continued)

Name	Location	Attributed designer	Date	Description/ ownership before listing	Grade	Listed	After listing
Brooke House	Basildon	Basildon Development Corporation with Basil Spence	1960–62	14-storey block of flats. Local authority. Built for professionals without families.	II	22/12/1998	Retained as social housing. The building, now a mix of council tenants, housing association tenants, and privately owned flats, is owned and managed by the local authority and now houses families. At the time of writing, facing major condition problems.
Point Royal	Bracknell	Arup Associates	1961–64	18-storey block of flats.	II	22/12/1998	Retained as social housing (housing association controlled).
Wyndham Court	Southampton	Lyons Israel Ellis	1966–69	Medium-rise concrete flats and maisonettes. Local authority but mixed tenure because of RTB.	II	22/12/1998	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Spa Green Estate	London	Berthold Lubetkin & Francis Skinner	1946–50	Estate of flat blocks. A mixed community of private owners and council tenants.	II*	22/12/1998	After listing, Homes for Islington with English Heritage initiated a restoration of the entire exterior plus the interior of flats still in council ownership. Now run by a resident-elected management organisation.
Bevin Court	London	Skinner, Bailey & Lubetkin	1951–54	7-storey block of flats.	II*	22/12/1998	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.

(continued)

Table 1: (continued)

Name	Location	Attributed designer	Date	Description/ ownership before listing	Grade	Listed	After listing
Sulkin and Trevelyan Houses	London	Fry, Drew, Drake & Lasdun	1955–58	Two towers of maisonettes.	II	22/12/1998	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Trellick Tower & Cheltenham Estate	London	Erno Goldfinger	1968–73	31-storey block of flats and maisonettes and mixed housing.	II*/II	22/12/1998, 13/11/ 2012	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB. Current plans for estate regeneration that add owner occupied housing.
Churchill Gardens	London	Powell & Moya	1947–54	Substantial mixed housing estate.	II	22/12/1998	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Lillington Gardens	London	Darbourne & Drake	1964–72	Mid-rise, multi-phase, brick estate.	II*/II	22/12/1998, 20/12/ 2000	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Passfields	London	Fry, Drew & Partners	1949–50	Low-rise estate of blocks of flats.	II	22/12/1998	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Alton Estate	London	LCC Architects' Department	1952–60	Two substantial mixed housing estates.	II/ II*	22/12/1998	Current plans for estate regeneration that add owner-occupied housing.
The Brunswick Centre	London	Patrick Hodgkinson	1967–72	Mixed use mega-structure, council housing above private shopping centre.	II	24/9/2000	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
39–73 Graham Park Road	Gosforth (Newcastle)	Clifford Wyld (Borough Architect)	1951–52	Small scheme of 18 flats.	II	11/7/2001	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.

(continued)

Table 1: (continued)

Name	Location	Attributed designer	Date	Description/ ownership before listing	Grade	Listed	After listing
Byker	Newcastle upon Tyne	Ralph Erskine	1970–82	Mostly low-rise large estate. Local authority.	II*	22/1/2007	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Branch Hill Estate	London	Camden Architects' Department (Benson & Forsyth)	1974–76	Expensive scheme of 42 semi-detached houses.	II	9/8/2010	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Dunboyne Road Estate	London	Camden Architects' Department (Neave Brown)	1971–77	Maisonettes and flats.	II	9/8/2010	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Hallfield Estate	London	Tecton and Lindsay Drake & Denys Lasdun	1949–56	14 blocks. Local authority.	II	9/6/2011	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.
Belvoir Estate	London	Islington Architects Department	1983–87	Low-rise, post-modern estate. Local authority.	II	18/4/2018	Retained as sheltered housing.
Sivill House	London	Skinner, Bailey & Lubetkin	1964–66	20-storey block. Local authority.	II	4/6/2020	Retained as social housing but impacted by RTB.

However, there are also examples where listing has supported the conservation-based refurbishment and repair of social housing. Bell (2011), for example, shows how the Spa Green Estate in London (listed Grade II* in 1998) was refurbished in the 2000s through collaboration between tenants, local authority, and English Heritage. Bell (2011) contrasts the Spa Green approach with the later emphasis on “regeneration” through tenure change in structures such as Park Hill. The outcomes of post-war listing have been contingent on the remit of heritage designation (i.e. the emphasis on listing notable architects and landmark buildings over representative examples or lived experience), the (lack of) investment opportunities for particular sites, the advocacy of key organisations and individuals, changing national priorities in estate regeneration, and the variable support of ministers and local government for the principles and practice of conserving post-war modernist social housing. As Table 1 demonstrates, while many of the examples of listed post-war social housing remain in majority public ownership (and majority social housing), the tenure mix and coherence of many estates had already been profoundly altered by the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme that from the early 1980s has given secure council tenants in the UK an opportunity to buy their home at a discounted price (RTB was abolished in Scotland in 2016 and in Wales in 2019, but currently operates in England).

The material and social impacts of post-war listing are therefore contingent on the particular socio-material-political assemblage of particular sites in their urban and historical context. Each post-war social housing project was different in its design, performance, and maintenance, and also in the decisions made about who to house in those buildings. Listing might have different implications for different buildings in different places at different times. It is in that context that we draw on two empirical examples to explore the complexities of post-war conservation and “heritagisation” in neoliberal urban restructuring. The first examines how issues of progressive practice have intersected with architectural interests in efforts to achieve the listing of buildings in the face of pressures for market regeneration of social housing estates in London. The second example examines whether listing has opened up alternative possibilities for the management and redevelopment of the Byker estate in Newcastle upon Tyne.

(The Limits to) Listing as Resistance in London

Between 2008 and 2015 the interests of architects, modern movement conservation groups, tenants, and housing activists intersected in ultimately unsuccessful campaigns to prevent the demolition of Robin Hood Gardens in East London (RHG; Alison and Peter Smithson, 1969–72) and its replacement by market-orientated redevelopment called Blackwall Reach (see Thoburn 2022). For architects and modern movement conservation, RHG was renowned as one of a limited number of buildings by the leading post-war architects, Alison and Peter Smithson; an expression of their commitment to “new brutalism” and an influential expression of the “streets in the sky” social housing they espoused. RHG was notable for the generosity of its living and open spaces, comprising two extended slab blocks of 214 flats, running north to south, placed towards the perimeter of

the site and facing onto a large open green space intended as a “stress-free zone” (Smithson and Smithson 2005). However, the completion of RHG coincided with the political and societal backlash against council housing and streets in the sky modernism and from the outside has had to work against its branding as “failure”. With its compromising architecture, RHG was an easy focus for anti-modernist attack, which did not match the lived experience of the building. Inevitably there have been challenges and criticisms of the building as is common on council estates where experience is shaped by disrepair and poverty. However, as Thoburn (2022) demonstrates, RHG remained popular with residents throughout its lifespan as its population has changed in line with the changing demographic of the surrounding area.

Although located in one of the poorest boroughs of London, the value of land beneath RHG increased significantly from the 1980s onwards due to intense pressures on housing, rising prices for housing and rents in London, and RHG’s proximity to the major state-sponsored regeneration of London’s Docklands as a financial, commercial, and residential centre:

Of course, it’s the politics that makes Robin Hood Gardens so fascinating and important. The estate’s proximity to Canary Wharf [the heart of London’s Docklands regeneration], and the relentless march of development across London’s East End outwards, is why, in part, the estate cannot be allowed to exist. Robin Hood Gardens appears squatting, both literally and figuratively, below the glinting towers of Britain’s newest financial centre, an impostor on the neoliberal landscape. (Brennan 2015:18)

RHG was not listed in the initial waves of post-war listing—an omission that reflected the challenges of the building and its long history of perceived failure. In 2008, RHG was incorporated into the Blackwall Reach joint regeneration venture between the Tower Hamlets Council and Swan Housing Association, with plans to replace the existing 214 flats within the two blocks on the RHG estate and some neighbouring housing and brownfield land, with 1,575 apartments. Around a third of those homes (561 units) would be “social rent” (comparable to the former council rent but not as secure or affordable). As Thoburn (2022:37) suggests, this would be relatively high for such development, though the promised figure for social or affordable rent often declines during development on similar schemes. Moreover, redevelopment would mean higher density living, taller buildings, single-aspect flats, reduced living space, and less open space, with architectural appraisals critical of the designs (Moore 2010).

Proposals for redevelopment led to a campaign for listing, alongside the collation and presentation of residents’ appreciation of the estate and their homes, and ways in which it might be improved (Thoburn 2022). The possibility of heritage listing offered an opportunity to question, politicise, and potentially open up the decision-making process to a different set of logics, if only by delaying development. The listing campaign was explicitly (and necessarily) about the architectural merits of the building. The main thrust of the arguments made by the architect-led campaign focused on the reputation of the Smithsons and the place of RHG within the wider history of post-war social housing. For some in the architectural community, the building’s architectural significance took precedence over

all other considerations, with conversion to gentrified private apartments acceptable if maintaining the fabric of the building:

the unintelligent housing policies of Tower Hamlets populated Robin Hood Gardens with the tenants least likely to be able to make sensible use of the accommodation. We have to whisper it, but the Unité d'Habitation works because it is populated by teachers, psychologists, doctors, graphic designers, not by single mothers struggling with buggies. (Bailey 2008)

However, the main campaign, led by the national amenity society for 20th century architecture (the Twentieth Century [or C20] Society) in alliance with the architectural periodical *Building Design* and high-profile architects, sought to engage more widely with broader issues about the social role of RHG.

In principle, the decision about heritage designation had to be made on grounds of architectural or historical significance, unaffected by considerations of the functionality or performance of the building. However, in practice, arguments about the significance of the buildings and the politics of decision-making were also about the “performance” of the building in terms of the building condition of RHG and its fundamental fitness for purpose as living space. The original recommendation by Tower Hamlets to proceed with demolition was accompanied by a residents’ survey that purported to show that a large majority of residents (c. 80%) were in favour of demolition and rehousing. However, the C20 Society challenged these findings, arguing that it was not made clear to tenants that redevelopment would mean a change in their tenure from council to tenants of a Registered Social Landlord, that the amount of space they occupied would almost certainly be reduced, and that the alternative of refurbishing the blocks was a realistic option (Powers 2010). The architectural magazine *Building Design* ran a leader that referred to residents being “duped” and “blackmailed” (Baillieu 2008). Indeed, an alternative survey undertaken by a resident claimed that the vast majority of residents wanted refurbishment of their existing flats (Hurst 2009), and later research confirmed that residents were generally content to continue living in RHG (Thoburn 2018). Moreover, the C20 Society argued that the early critiques and associations of RHG were no longer true and issues of vandalism and anti-social behaviour no longer prevalent. Rather the problems experienced by residents, they argued, were due to a lack of maintenance and crude and poor-quality repairs (Robinson 2010).

The regeneration stakes involved in RHG and its contested status as valuable social housing made it unlikely that governments on the Left or the Right would seek to protect the estate. Indeed, RHG created divisions within English Heritage (EH). EH’s Advisory Committee recommended that RHG be accepted for listing, but EH Commissioners overturned the view of its Advisory Committee, recommending that listing be refused. The UK government confirmed that RHG would not be listed in May 2008 and a Certificate of Immunity was granted, guaranteeing that listing could not occur for five years. Demolition would have probably followed swiftly were it not for the 2008 economic downturn and it was not until 2012 that demolition plans were passed by Tower Hamlets Council and final planning approval for the redevelopment scheme given in December 2012. The

opportunity for a second conservation challenge came when the Certificate of Immunity expired in 2014. However, unsurprisingly the second request for listing was turned down and a new Certificate of Immunity issued.

The prospect of listing RHG could be seen as an impediment to the progressive redevelopment of the site *if* the goal of redevelopment had been to provide improved social housing. However, the redevelopment of RHG is part of a wider process of “estate redevelopment” across the country as council housing estates are sold off by local authorities facing severe cuts in housing budgets and state regeneration funding. In the context of the UK, such revanchist approaches to council housing estates are most stark in London. Council estates have been considered the final gentrification frontier in the city, representing the last vestige of truly affordable housing (Lees 2014; Lees and Hubbard 2020). It has been estimated that by 2017, 237 estates in the UK were subject to some form of estate renewal, the vast majority in Labour-controlled local authorities (Architects for Social Housing 2017), typically entailing demolition and intensified redevelopment, with a high proportion of property for sale post-redevelopment, alongside some not-very-affordable “affordable housing”. The land values potential of estates has itself been used to justify such processes of displacement (Adonis and Davies 2015). Across London, residents have sought to resist this “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003), with limited success (Lees and Hubbard 2020). At stake in redevelopment is the erosion of tenure rights, the disenfranchisement and marginalisation of social rented housing, and the displacement of residents. For those who remain, reduced living standards can involve smaller properties located in the least desirable areas of the site.

The relational politics of RHG are captured in the following quote from Martin (2015:40):

for some observers, RHG stands for the arrogance and intellectual follies of architectures and critics, and the fallacies of brutalism and modernism in general; for others, the estate epitomises the very ordinary failure of successive governments to maintain council housing, while its redevelopment highlights the extraordinary greed for the London property market.

Thus, the redevelopment of RHG encapsulates the logic of the wider process of estate regeneration in London. In the case of RHG, the modernist form of the estate was integral to the discourse of erasure, with terminology such as “concrete monstrosities” used to justify the erasure of social housing as a humane act (Thoburn 2018), without discussing what the alternatives might be for those who are displaced.

Listing and the Value of the Byker Estate, Newcastle

The Byker Estate (Ralph Erskine, 1969–82) is located two miles east of Newcastle city centre and was awarded Grade II* listing in 2007 because of its influential ground-breaking design and for its pioneering approach to public participation. With over 1,600 houses and flats, the estate was an extension of post-war slum replacement and was one of the last heroic post-war attempts to provide better

housing for a working-class community before such council housing programmes were stopped by the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

“Old Byker” was a dense grid of 19th century terraced housing constructed for an industrial workforce employed primarily in riverside industries such as ship-building. Ralph Erskine, appointed architect in 1968, was committed to improving the physical fabric without disrupting relational resources, and was noted for his “community architecture” approach that demystified the architectural process, setting up an office in the heart of the Byker area where their open-door policy, when residents could talk to architects and influence emerging proposals, allowed a demystifying of the architectural process (Blundell Jones; Drage 2008). As Vall (2013) discussed, this was a participatory approach combined with modernist social engineering, informed by Erskine’s Swedish background and practice these “emancipatory goals were underpinned by the work of Newcastle City Council, which as landlord pre-allocated dwellings with a strong concern for facilitating the retention of neighbourly contacts that were seen to be supportive” (Pendlebury and Haley 2021:61).

With the Byker Estate, here was a commitment to learn from and address some of the problems of post-war modernist estates in relation to the importance of maintaining existing community relationships, design and aesthetics:

The most well-known architectural feature of the estate is the perimeter block—“the Byker Wall”—defines the northern part of the site and was designed to reduce the noise from a planned urban motorway to the north, and to create the feeling of a village within the city. (Pendlebury and Haley 2021:60)

Beyond the “Wall” the housing blocks were mainly low-rise dwellings of various sizes, set within a strong landscaping framework. Extensive use was made of light materials, including brightly coloured timber cladding. Social facilities introduced included a large number of “hobby rooms” for residents, and space heating was provided through a district heating system. Erskine envisaged that Byker would change and develop to meet community needs. However, issues of maintenance (given the cheap and flexible materials used), car parking (cars were kept to the periphery in the original design), the expensive heating system, and changing social practices were to become recurrent problems in the decades after construction.

From the late 1970s, these issues in combination with constrained local authority budgets, deindustrialisation, and vandalism, led to the Estate’s decline and population flight. Byker quickly began to develop a poor reputation and in the late 1990s the local authority proposed the demolition of the small but architecturally significant Bolam Coyne block and some adjacent terraces. Always a less popular part of the estate, Bolam Coyne had become associated with anti-social behaviour, with its accessible roofs being used as a playground. However, proposed demolition was the stimulus for an influential local and national campaign to protect the estate through historic building listing, which was subsequently recommended by English Heritage in 2000, and implemented after considerable

delay and indecision by the UK government in 2007 at the higher level Grade II* for the entirety of the estate.

The campaign for listing might have been led by architectural elites from outside Byker, but it also helped to uncover and galvanise latent local pride and long-standing networks of neighbourhood governance, kinship, and friendship (Pendlebury et al. 2009) in what had become a diverse ethnic community (Konttinen 1988, 2009). Significant efforts were made to engage residents with the idea of heritage protection as part of developing a conservation plan for the estate, including, for example, taking a group of residents to visit the listed Park Hill in Sheffield (North East Civic Trust 2003). Interviews with residents from during the listing debate showed a range of positive and negative perspectives about the estate, but for many, despite its problems, Byker was considered “special” and valued for its positive quality of housing and place, albeit this place quality did not necessarily align with how heritage status conceptualises “specialness” (Pendlebury et al. 2009).

Newcastle City Council, wary of listing because of the significant investment needed, correctly assumed that the listing would make intervention more expensive. Listing triggered discussions between the city council and the national government Homes and Communities Agency and, with the support of the then housing minister, led to the commissioning of a task force to examine potential futures (Byker Investment Task Force 2010), which recommended that ownership of the vast majority of the estate should pass to a resident-led mutual community trust (minus the relatively small number of properties acquired by tenants under “Right to Buy”), effectively passing the ownership of the estate from the city council to residents and removing the historic debt from the estate. The incoming coalition government (later to pursue ruthless programmes of estate demolition) was keen to promote the recommendation as part of its then commitment to “localism”, describing the proposals as “the embodiment of the Big Society” (MHCLG 2011), and it was approved by residents by unanimous vote in 2011, triggering the creation of the Byker Community Trust (BCT) in July 2012. This was to open up the possibility of a progressive future for the estate that seemed to respect its original purpose as genuinely social housing with a responsive local management regime. In reality, despite the title, BCT was created as a housing association, which largely freed the estate from its historic construction debt, so that rental income could be retained for maintenance and repair.

From 2012, BCT embarked on an ambitious and transformative 13-year £47.5m programme of physical renewal of the housing stock, heating system, and the wider landscape, which significantly exceeds the promises made at stock transfer. While the investment programme has helped to address many if not all of the physical issues, much harder to resolve are issues of deep and systemic poverty, disempowered residents, and territorial stigma. Byker is one of the poorest wards in the country, with lower-than-average life expectancies, poor educational achievement, and growing reliance on food banks (Pendlebury and Haley 2021).

One of the “golden threads” for BCT has been to “make Byker an estate of choice”; a stable community, a place where people want to live, rather than

being forced to live through a lack of an alternative, and to stay, slowing the very rapid turnover in some parts of the estate. Although at national level access to affordable housing has become a major issue, in the East End of Newcastle, BCT found itself in competition with six other registered social landlords, as well as low-priced private sector housing. In that context, BCT concluded that significant further investment was needed to support the social transformation of the estate, including environmental improvements, enhanced play facilities, and improvements to the overall appearance. BCT also identified the potential to build new houses on undeveloped sites to meet needs such as low access homes. To finance the additional investment and mitigate financial risk, in 2021, and with resident support, BCT merged with the larger Karbon Homes housing association, with whom it had been cooperating on cost sharing since 2016. Integral to the merger was that BCT retained its own identity and on-site management, with residents seeing no difference in day-to-day management, and residents retaining their place in the management structure. The vision to make Byker a better place for its residents, working positively within the architectural and landscape legacy of the Erskine redevelopment, is unchanged.

Listing has provided the platform not just for protecting the Byker Estate, but for the architectural distinctiveness of the site to be translated into a progressive vision for regeneration under a resident-led housing community trust. A process of charting a way forward, developed by a nexus of government and government agencies, and far removed from residents, eventually led to a very different governance and ownership context, with more local decision-making, and affecting what management interventions can be made. The BCT strategy does not guarantee better outcomes for residents in the longer term, but it has enabled a form of resistance to prevailing logics of regeneration in England. While this reflects the local value context (the absence of a “rent gap” because of relatively low demand and low land values for the site if developed), it also demonstrates the ways in which listing can support alternative forms of political and community engagement with social housing futures.

Listed status has made building work more expensive and complicated (e.g. re-roofing costs have been twice cheaper alternatives [Pendlebury and Haley 2021]), but BCT has maintained that the distinctive architecture of the estate is one of the things (along with its people) that make Byker special and is to be celebrated. This has been paralleled by community initiatives, such as a Byker Ralph Erskine Society and recent community efforts to develop a Byker Living Archive. These resident-led initiatives recognise and celebrate the formal architectural qualities of Byker while also embracing a more nuanced, holistic view of place encompassing the people of Byker and their lives and stories.

Conclusions

Historic building conservation is not usually seen as a site of Left resistance in the city. However, in this paper we have explored how the “history first” logic of conservation protection might disrupt market-based urban development, and if so, whether it is of potential value in tactics to advance progressive urbanism. We

have focused specifically on what the extended remit of built heritage protection to post-war buildings in England has meant for strategies to protect and revalue the physical substance, historic legacy, and urban spaces of collective social housing from the 1950s and 1960s in the face of dominant state strategies to cleanse class meanings and marginalise, reduce, or replace social housing (Thoburn 2018).

The politics of listing building protection (what to protect and in what form) are only a small part of wider struggles over social housing and estate regeneration in England, including the ongoing impact of Right to Buy legislation. Our interest is in the protection of what remains from welfare state architecture of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s (the “Architecture of Social Intent”) for residents in the present and future, but also to ask what protecting those structures might represent as material and symbolic markers of alternative—and increasingly subaltern—state-societal possibilities for social housing and urbanism (cf. Krivy 2022). Labelling structures such as RHG and Byker as progressive architecture or class projects is not straightforward (Thoburn 2022). Nevertheless, in its ethos and built form, the notion of an “Architecture of Social Intent” embodies the political and societal commitment in the 1950s and 1960s to social protection through state-supported social housing and its visible presence in the urban landscape.

As our examples demonstrate, although conservation of historic buildings is potentially a challenge to market hegemony, in England decisions about what to protect and in what form are ultimately taken by national governments in a context where heritage value (and social heritage value) is subject to wider social, ideological, economic, and regeneration priorities. Although enthusiastically embraced by English Heritage, the political-economic threat of “post-war listing” has been increasingly nullified by UK national governments. Listed protection has not been granted to notable buildings such as RHG because it would limit options for demolition and replacement. Many examples of listed post-war social housing have been significantly altered in function and form and post-war listing has itself been co-opted in some cases for heritage-led gentrification. Arguably, the Byker Estate has remained so far as social housing (and without radical alteration) because of the limited funding and investment opportunities for estate regeneration. The different outcomes (so far) for Byker and RHG largely reflect the logic of funding estate regeneration from 2010 onwards by exploiting the land value “rent gap” when social housing is replaced with owner-occupation (in a context where there is limited state investment to support other regeneration models). Economic valuation perhaps more than political preference determines whether buildings survive and in what form with what uses regardless of the listing process in England.

The paper raises questions of whether and how the apparently conservative instruments of heritage conservation might be used as part of tactical politics for progressive ends. One reading of the experiences of the paper would be for the Left to dismiss state historic building protection as a co-opted state activity that ultimately reproduces authorised heritage discourses. This includes the priority given to expert assessments that prioritise architectural and historical value over lived experience, with limited scope for resident perspectives. Nevertheless, as the

case of Byker suggests, the notion of special importance embodied in listed building protection could be important in not only the retention of the estate as a physical embodiment of socially progressive value that can be given meaning over time, but also as a basis for community engagement and a more locally based and bespoke approach to regeneration that goes beyond the priority given to architectural style in listing decisions. Moreover, it is not insignificant that listing has at least preserved material fragments of the post-war Architecture of Social Intent, albeit altered and reshaped in physical form and use, that future generations can engage with. In a number of cases, those buildings have been sensitively refurbished, and many have remained in majority public ownership in a political environment that has been hostile to social rent.

A further issue is therefore whether conservation advocacy could shift from a relatively narrow and potentially elite focus on particular buildings to a wider conception of progressive engagement with urban change and memory. In Scotland, for example, in 2021, eight blocks of high-rise flats in Aberdeen (later reduced to five) were listed for their role in social and city planning following suggestions from residents (Aberdeen City Council 2021), emphasising a stronger role for the lived experiences and historical meaning of subaltern buildings as opposed to the prioritisation of architectural style. Advocacy for the Architecture of Social Intent has similarly combined an interest in the aesthetics of post-war modernism, with support for its social purpose, and a critique of the undermining of collective infrastructures in neoliberal urban redevelopment (Hatherley 2011). Those approaches suggest ways in which historic building conservation might provide a platform for resistance to the evisceration and marginalisation of alternative pasts and progressive futures.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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