

WEEK 08- STRUCTURES

ARCH-572, ARCHITECTURE THEORY AND CRITICISM

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The paper investigates different perceptions from notable authors on Alison and Peter Smithson's 1972 housing project, Robin Hood Gardens. I analyze the utopian ideas that Smithsons programmed for the future housing in the early 1950's, and how effectively they were able to shape those ideas into form for Robin Hood Gardens. Eisenman and various other authors' interpretation is observed through essays on Robin Hood Gardens. It was realised that following Eisenman's criticism on Smithsons, most authors criticised Smithsons negatively, without analysing external factors that could have possibly led to the building's failure. A series of essays and publications from notable authors from a brief period, shall give an in-depth perspective of what factors led to change in ideas of a utopian housing for Smithsons while designing for Robin Hood Gardens. And what were reasons could justify the building's failure in later years.

After completion of the project, Peter Eisenman published an essay the same year in 1972, questioning their ability to have changed from utopian planner, (whose primary concern is to develop ideas) to an actual builder (whose mere concern is the building process).[2]54. Following Eisenman, other authors including Mark Crimson, Alan Powers and Helena Webster's observations were analysed to grasp a comprehensive overview of the Smithson's ideology towards the project. Peter Cook, in his essay "*Regarding the Smithsons*" writes that the Smithsons in their practice, reminded them of their uniqueness through every medium of expression, from building to their clothes.[1]291 With their avant-garde approach to architecture, Smithsons chose the path of so called 'New-Brutalism', where they tried to follow masters without any mannerism.[1]293 Peter and Alison Smithson were being criticised by authors for not having able to shape their utopian ideas in real life(that they were promoting for past fifteen years), when they got the opportunity to present their first housing project, Robin Hood Gardens. The argument lies whether the Smithsons really failed?

Peter Eisenman's article, "*From Golden Lane to Robin Hood Gardens; Or If you Follow the Yellow Brick Road, It May Not Lead to Golders Green.*" suggests that architecture is a continuous dialogue between ideas and forms. He argues that letting form suggest usage of a building is no less of an approach than ideas suggesting a form.[2]:41 However, his personal inclination lies towards ideas shaping forms, not the vice-versa. In his essay, "*Aspects of Modernism: Maison Dom-Ino and the Self-Referential Sign.*" he writes that, modernism in architecture is a state of mind that is governed by surrounding aspects like aesthetics, culture, social and economic factor[3]140. According to Eisenman, Alison and Peter Smithson's modernist ideology, was to come up with a set of articulated ideas that would suggest forms at both architecture and urban level.[2]:41 To analyse their commitment, Eisenman uses their first and last built housing project 'Robin Hood Gardens'.

Smithson's housing concept was mainly articulated by the metaphor "building as a street", one of the "major contributions of the Modern Movement to twentieth-century urbanism"[2]41. Their attempts were to come up with the most appropriate solution for the modern city, where streets (that provided direct occupancy to humans), shall be now governed by motors. This also brought a change in the relationship between dwelling and

streets. Eisenman argues that the initial concept of 'street', as they proposed in the Golden Lane Housing Scheme, was not the same in Robin Hood Gardens. He asserts that the Smithsons failed to sustain their idea in built-forms by stating that there is "a disparity between what is said and what is done"[2]:52. To prove his argument, he writes that for their Golden Lane concept in 1952, "the Smithsons were saying that the street had been invalidated by the motor car... streets dominated by the motor car seem to have been unacceptable to the Smithsons, for they introduce the elevated pedestrian decks, now as a completely connected system"[2]54. He compares this idea to the 1972 Robin Hood Gardens project highlighting that, "there is no horizontal connection of pedestrian decks. This, in conjunction with the provision of a garage for each unit"[2]54 Eisenman disagrees to Smithson's change in ideology towards the street/dwelling relationship in housing. By doing so, he contradicts his own saying that "changes in architecture can in some manner be traced to changes in culture... advancement in technology, the development of new conditions of use, and the change in significance of certain rituals and their domain of performance." [3]139 In Eisenman's words, "Modernist sensibility has to do with a changes mental attitude toward the artefacts of the physical world"[4]238, which means that programming ideas into forms has to do nothing with how ideas were generated in past, but relates to what is required by the current physical world.

However, authors from later years had a different judgement for the Smithsons. Mark and Alan's essays suggests empathy towards them. After thorough readings and time mappings from these authors, it was realized that it became important for Smithsons to evolve their ideas with time. Smithsons had realised that their naive utopian ideas as projected in their concepts of Ville Contemporaine and Golden Lane Housing were unreal. They managed to face the reality and revise their ideas based on their current conditions and requirements while designing for Robin Hood Gardens. In 1952, Smithsons openly demonstrated their dislike towards cars being dominated by streets. But as time passed, they had began to realise that there was no denying to motor roads shaping the urban scale, whether they like it or not. Alan Powers writes that for Robin Hood Gardens, Smithsons work first involved developing a set of ideas through examining not only architectural works from masters such as Le-Corbusier and Mies Van Der Rohe, but also examining social matters that were outside architecture. Such as painting, sculpture, graphics and future projections[4]241. By doing so, Smithsons were able to come up with concerns particular to stimulating spaces that lied between home and city. With pedestrians as their central idea to understand the urban context, Smithsons began to combine "verbal graphical suggestions with verbal argument designed to challenge assumptions rather than offer ready-made solutions." [4]241 While designing Robin Hood Gardens, they considered all the recent factors that required no attention in their earlier concepts. Such as, the need to densify housing to at least 136 persons/acre, solution to open space deficiency and protection from traffic noise.[4]232 The writer suggests that although the idea of a street deck failed to reach its expectations from paper to its actual project, the subconscious engagement of the idea in theory is still important[4]242.

Heuvel in his essay, "Recolonising the modern: Robin Hood Gardens today", claims that Robin Hood Gardens went down in history as an utter failure. It was horrifically vandalised by its residents, and it spelled the end of its designers' international status as star architect"[7]32 However, Alison Smithson, in her essay, '*The Violent Consumer, or Waiting for the Goodies*' suggests that it was "exacerbated by a welfare-state bureaucracy that was unable to find ways of handling over responsibility to its tenets and instead blamed architecture." [8].

Smithsons in my opinion, were courageous in speculating cultural and social shifts and were quite successful in translating those ideas to reality. Eisenman and other Heuvel ignores factors such as time, economy and client requirements, that forced Smithsons to re-think on their ideas about Robin Hood Gardens. Eisenman himself insists that “Postfunctionalism is a term of absence”. He supports the idea of negation in functionalism and claims that one should develop a larger framework that is universal and brings in a new consciousness in architecture. [4]:239. Smithsons did the same. As an example, they allowed flexibility for occupiers to organise their own space of occupation[6]. In fact, Eisenman also admires Smithsons for their non-compromising approach of translating ideas into forms at an age faced with harsh economic, political and social realities[2]:55. He appreciates the Smithsons for their commitment towards architecture by not compromising their ideals and to have realised their ideas into built forms[2]:55 It was observed that no fixed set of “utopian-ideas’ can be ideal for all people at all time. Situations change. So does ideas. Smithsons did not fail. It was Robin Hood Gardens that failed with time.

References

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