The Event of Void

Architecture and politics in the evacuated Heygate estate

1 Void as Event
7 Image Factory
11 Ruins: Folding the Present
19 Speculative Landscape
25 Void as Project

A project by
Francesco
Sebregondi

www.francesco
sebregondi.net

Graphic design
David Keshavjee
and Julien Tavelli
(maximage.biz)

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I first saw it from the bus. An outstandingly massive brown rectangle, crossed by thick horizontal streaks, blind, still. For a minute at least it replaced the sky, as the scratched window pane was sliding along it, perfectly parallel. I could only discern a breach of grey light, before it was shut again by another, identical surface, forming a right angle and disappearing in the rear landscape.

Another post-war housing mammoth destined to be wiped out, one might hastily conclude. Completed in 1974, the Heygate estate consists of 23 blocks of various sizes which, altogether, encase 1260 flats. Once home to more than 3000 people, it is now almost completely deserted—only 6 flats weren't sealed off on August 1st, 2011. The "decanting" of the inhabitants—so it was called by Southwark Council—started in 2004, as part of the £1.5 billion regeneration scheme of the Elephant & Castle. Following the erection, in 2010, of a 148-meter residential skyscraper on the edge of the roundabout, colourful mid-rise condominiums have mushroomed around the area, making the stiff and austere blocks of the Heygate look more and more out of place.

Whoever has been living in London in the past few years can hardly not have heard of the Heygate, considering its insistent appearance in the media. It has become, or was put forward as, a common object of debate. In one corner, the partisans of its demolition: they insist on the inhuman character of this grey and ugly monster, whose architecture is a mistake of the past, responsible for the crime and social decay that plagued the life on the estate for too long; therefore, bringing it down will be an act of social justice, and a chance to build a brighter future for the area. In the other corner, the less audible opponents: they denounce the infamy of evicting a thousand families before being able to rehouse them decently, or of leaving perfectly sound flats empty for years, to finally replace such a substantial stock of social housing with mainly market-price apartments; therefore, in the context of the continual housing crisis in London, bringing the Heygate down will be a deliberate social crime, aiming at clearing the area of its lowest-income inhabitants and paving the way for unbridled property speculation. While each side is busy convincing a distracted public that it is right or wrong, the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle goes on, as if impervious to all that chitchat.

The story sounds familiar, even timeworn today—which immediately calls off its chances of mobilising crowds to change the outcome. Told this way, the case of the Heygate gets immediately reabsorbed in the broader historical narrative of the death of council housing in the United Kingdom; more precisely, of its premeditated slow liquidation. In the last thirty years, the story has been thoroughly investigated from a wide range of perspectives, either laudatory or scathing, and in the end digested by the majority as one more neoliberal fatality. In fact,

the absence of change in the plot narrating its death sustains the collective perception of the council estate as an atavism; and of its burial, as a progress. This way, the liquidation of each of the numerous remaining estates can carry on slowly but surely, without encountering much resistance. Such battles themselves have become outmoded.

In order to avoid this trap, it is another story that we will tell here. We won't focus on what the Heygate was, or on what will be built in its place, but on what it is now. We will shift from a macro- to a micro-historical lens, and attempt to reverse a crucial perspective. Even as a temporary side-product, the on-going regeneration has produced something quite remarkable in a city: *a void.* An unoccupied, un-utilised, un-programmed space. What is more, its temporariness is very relative. It took form in the course of the year 2007, and is planned to last until 2015, year of the announced final demolition of the Heygate's main blocks. Eight years of a void that we will posit as a product, not simply as the result of a subtraction.

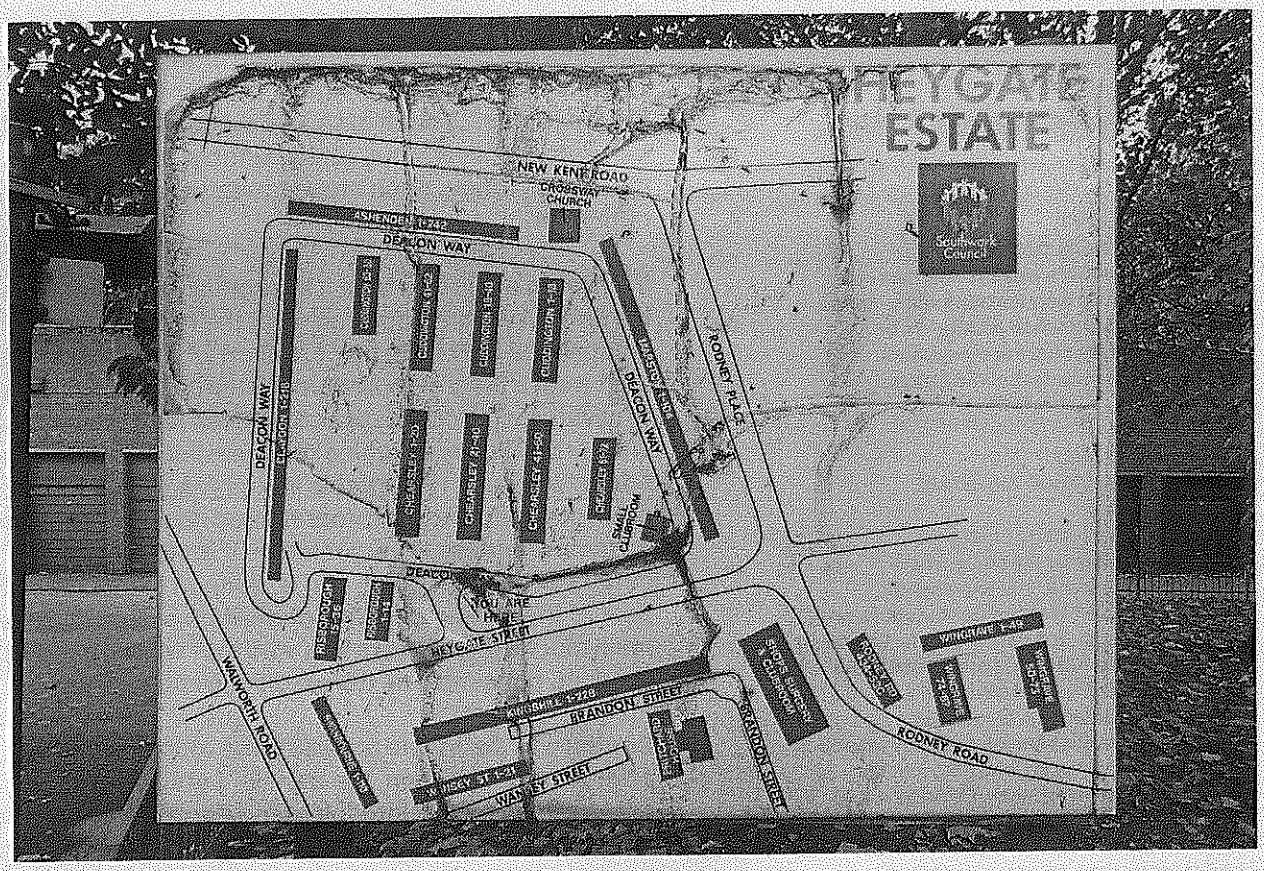
Contrary to the stable profiles to be found before and after a transformation, the transient states of urban areas rarely make it into the grand narrative of a city, and often not even in collective memory. Yet in suspending, or loosening, the commandment of putting to valuable use every square foot of the urban environment, these transient states are moments of radical alterity, and have often made up the ground for the emergence of new spatial, cultural and political practices. We could evoke the *borgate* of Rome in the 1950s, as narrated by Pasolini where, stuck among the ruins of the war and the housing blocks in never-ending construction, a sub-proletarian youth was cultivating its own, savage subjectivity, far from every established institution—family, church or school [1]. Or again, the long-lasting building site of the *Halles* in Paris, behind the fences of which the pioneers of French Punk and other emerging alternative movements of the 1980s used to gather together, and called that void home [2]. In both cases, out of the gap that linked two steps of a rectilinear programme, an unexpected diagonal sprang which made that very programme tremble.

On the other hand, how new is the newness brought forth by urban regenerations? As the very term implies, regenerating consists in managing a growth, updating a form, but also reproducing a structure and preventing any fundamental mutation [3]. Yet today, at least in cities whose extensive growth has reached a turning point, and has become less profitable than an intensive one, architecture's most public role is that of instrument for urban regeneration. Always subordinate to a financial scheme, architects are consulted mainly to actualise the potential profit of an area, by designing the most desirable places to live and consume. As bold and contemporary as those

[1]
PASOLINI, P-P. (1955)
Ragazzi di vita, 13th edition,
Milan: Garzanti.
P. 16: "houses not yet finished and already in ruins, [...]".

[2]
EUDELINE, P. (2003)
'Village Punk', Nova, December;
P. 30: "And then there was the hole. Marvellous abyss with its wooden barricades, nailed up in haste, soon covered with layers of posters. A building site. For many years. Which were the sweetest of the *Halles.*"

[3]
MASSUMI, B. (2002)
Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation,
Durham: Duke University Press.
P. 27: "For structure is the place where nothing ever happens, that explanatory heaven in which all eventual permutations are prefigured in a self-consistent set of invariant generative rules. Nothing is prefigured in the event. It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox. It is the suspension of the invariance that makes happy happy, sad sad, function function, and meaning mean. Could it be that it is through the expectant suspension of that suspense that the new emerges? As if an echo of irreducible excess, of gratuitous amplification, piggybacked on the reconnection to progression, bringing a tinge of the unexpected, the lateral, the unmotivated, to lines of action and reaction. A change in the rules. The expression-event is the system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against regeneration (the reproduction of a structure)."


HEYGATE
ESTATE
NEW KENT ROAD
CROSSWAY CHURCH
DEACON WAY
DEACON WAY
DEACON WAY
RODNEY PLACE
DEACON WAY
SMALL CLIFTON
HEYGATE STREET
WALWORTH ROAD
BRANDON STREET
BRANDON STREET
WALNUT STREET
RODNEY ROAD
YOUNGMAN CLOSE

newly built forms might appear, they leave intact, and indeed actively sustain, the structural logics of the neoliberal city: ravenous commodification and relentless expansion of the market. Through the gap opened by the evacuated Heygate estate, the essay seeks to address the following problem: what are the conditions of architecture as *politics*, beyond architecture as mere *police*[4]? Or, what are the conditions of *transformation* of the built environment, beyond its mere *regeneration?* Or again, how to engage in a practice of architecture that doesn't merely mirror the cultural, political and economic structures underpinning our present-day reality, but becomes that *hammer with which to shape it* (Brecht)? And this not by imposing visionary projects from above, which would perpetuate the oligarchic tradition surrounding the ruling of architectural questions. How can architecture truly involve a community in its discussion and production? How can it open a field, for transforming one's conditions of life through the creation and re-creation of its spaces?

As the pattern of the Elephant & Castle regeneration matches that of many other examples in various European cities, we won't dwell on its mapping. Instead we will refer to a solid existing bibliography on the subject, both regarding the general procedures of urban regeneration [5] and its conditions in this specific case [6]. Ours, then, is another concern: the Heygate estate, as a piece of architecture, is dead; only left is its empty corpse, a delimited void. What is going on in this void? What is at stakes in its production and maintenance? What is its relation to the teeming city surrounding it? What is the subversive potential of that void? And since the appearance of a temporary void tends to be a constant within the pattern of urban regenerations, could we start thinking these voids together: as places from which to question, perhaps reinvent, the inherited axioms of the practice of architecture?

[4]
RANCIERE, J. (1998)
"Wrong: Poltics and Police" in
Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
P. 28: "Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and role, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police.*
[...]
I now propose to reserve the term politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part of those who have no part. This break is manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts or lacks of parts have been defined. Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place destination."

[5]
TALLON, A. (2009)
Urban Regeneration in the UK
London: Routledge;

PORTER, L. / SHAW, K. (2009)
Whose Urban Renaissance?:
An International Comparison of Urban Regeneration Policies
London: Routledge;
HATHERLEY, O. (2010)
A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain
London: Verso.

[6]
NEOutopia (2011),
a project by the Geography group (Goldsmiths, Department of Visual Cultures).
<http://neo-utopianism.blogspot.com>

Page 4:

Plan of the Heygate estate, 2010

The Heygate from the roof of the Claydon block, 2011

Made possible by the void, the abundant fictionalisation of the Heygate rubs off on its remembered past, and by feedback loop becomes the very motive of its evacuation in the first place.

A teenager stabbed to death on the Claydon walkway. A man bottled in the face, then beaten up by a gang in front of the Chearsley terraces. Prostitutes and junkies lining along the garages of the Ashenden block. Several hundred hooligans charging down Deacon way. Hood-covered youths throwing bricks and molotovs at riot police, at the foot of the Marston block lit by the flames of burning cars [7].

All these scenes have the Heygate for background. Between 2007 and 2010, no less than 76 films—feature-length movies, shorts, documentaries, music videos, advertisements...—were shot in the estate. Unsurprisingly it became a filming location of choice, with its highly photogenic brutalist architecture, immediately expressive of a gritty inner-city environment; its enormous vacant space, allowing to stage panoramic views without the interferences of residents; and its generous administration, handing cheap licences fast [8]. With those issued in three years, Southwark Council earned £91,000—a trifle, compared to the advantage gained from such a vast communication plan.

The overproduction of images featuring the Heygate estate, be it in a fictional or documentary context, seems to have two major effects, each related to a distinct agency of the image: as evidence and as mask. First, because of the dominant aesthetics employed and the brutality most often depicted in them, the mass of circulating images of the Heygate become as many evidences, produced in a trial by media. As a late visual postface to Coleman's *Utopia on Trial* [9], images of crimes taking place *within* the estate point to the Heygate's architecture as the true perpetrator of a broader social crime. We spectators are assigned the role of a jury: faced with scenes of ultra-violence shot in realer-than-life mode, we are drawn to find the same old walkways, and the big dark buildings they link, guilty *per se.* No matter if the death sentence was pronounced before the trial: once the make-up is removed, when the inanimate corpse of the estate appears in the news, it goes without saying that "justice has been done" [10]. Regardless of various contradicting testimonies by former inhabitants, the image of a "failed", "crime-plagued", "sink estate" gained the status of a fact, thereby reconstructing an artificial past and inscribing it within collective memory. Made possible by the void, the abundant fictionalisation of the Heygate rubs off on its remembered past, and by feedback loop becomes the very motive of its evacuation in the first place.

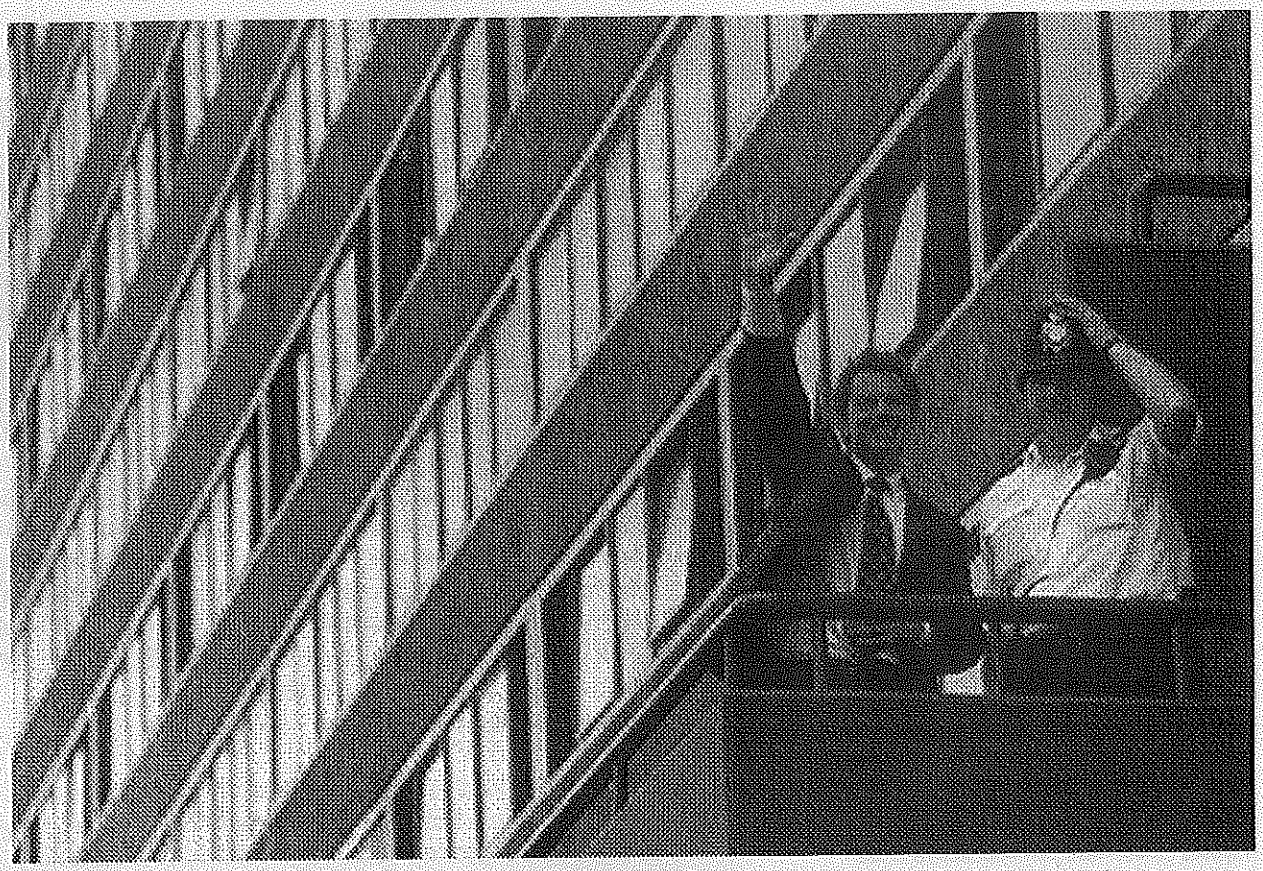
A second effect of this flow of pictures, related to the very phenomenology of the image, is to dissolve both the specificity and the materiality of the Heygate as a place. Because of the architectural likeness of many estates at first sight, and the repetitive use of established framings when shooting them, the Heygate, when appearing on

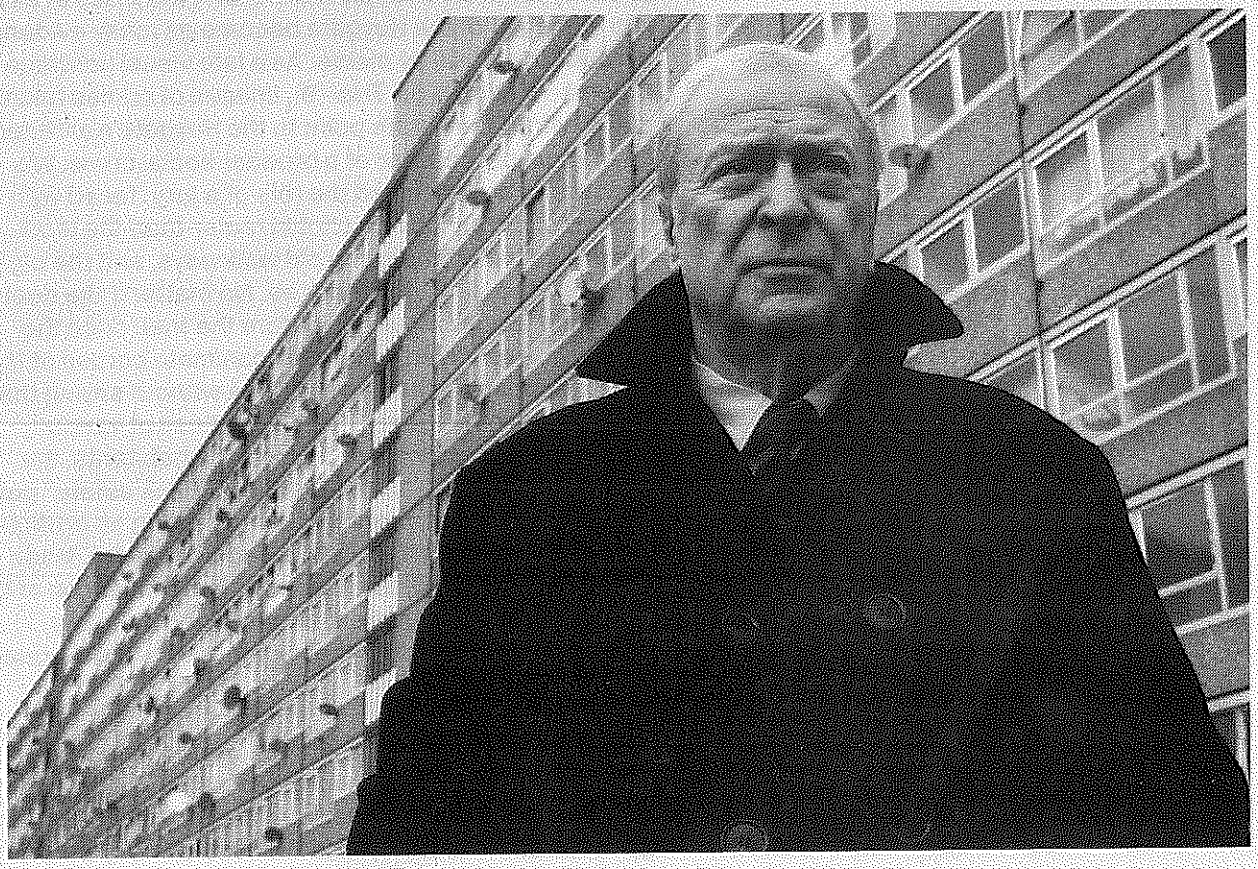
[7]
Scenes from *Fallout* (2007), *Harry Brown* (2009), *Shank* (2010) and *The Bill* (S.26 ep. 13—2010).

[8]
On the homepage of the Southwark Film Office website, one can read: "Southwark is considered to be most film friendly borough in London. We have very short lead in times, helpful Film Officers and great locations." Following complaints from the remaining residents, the Heygate estate was recently taken out from from the list of the "Council Estates" available as filming locations. Films and TV shows are nevertheless still shot there occasionally.

[9]
COLEMAN, A.M. (1985)
Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing
London: Shipman.
Building statistical links between traces of "social malaise" (litter, graffiti, vandalism) and architectural features in council estates, Coleman's book became the theoretical foundation for housing policy reforms under Thatcher's administration.

[10]
Since 2004, 43 articles mentioning the Heygate estate have been published in the following five news media: BBC News, The Times, The Guardian, The Independent, Financial Times.





[11]
Tony Blair, during his 1997 speech in the Aylesbury estate, announcing New Labour's plan to regenerate Britain's inner-cities: "there must not be any no hope areas".

screen or in the city, is masked behind the generic image of the council estate. And although there are currently some eight million tenants in social housing in England, thirty years of stigmatisation in political discourse and popular culture have established the council estate as a page already turned in the city's history. The more the Heygate is represented, the more its presence in the city becomes blurred: it is replaced by the abstract yet actively sustained stereotype of a *no-zone*—no law, no hope, no access [11]. It follows a chain reaction: precisely because it is visibly fading, there seems to be a collective impulse to fix the Heygate in images, to store it in archives—as the innumerable photographs of it online attest. Is it then the multitude of photographers who, consciously or not, reemploy the conventional aesthetics of the council estate, or is it our accustomed eye that now sees it everywhere and cannot go beyond a generic image? Be that as it may, with each new picture or film, it is that very image of a failure destined to vanish, which is regenerated.

The empty estate has become a *machine to exhibit*, a factory of images and imagination. It is now clear that the temporary void is more than a money pit to be quickly capped. It has been transformed into a crucial support for the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle. Indeed, what is at the core of such a broad process, if not improving *the image* of the area? It is firstly its new image, and only secondarily its new material conditions, that will attract people and capitals from afar and make this colossal financial operation a success. To reinforce the perception of a change takes a twofold manœuvre: before producing a new appearance, the accent is made on the former—the spectacle of the finally vanquished monster. Various films shot in the Heygate benefitted from a nation-wide and even international diffusion. It is therefore on a large scale that one should evaluate the effects of the visual exploitation of this void. Beyond the specific regeneration of the Elephant & Castle, what it sustained is a meticulous neoliberal agenda: one bit at a time and possibly through the back door, obliterating the very political project that the council estate still evokes—*housing as a right*. In this perspective, the actors of urban regenerations go well beyond a team of developers and councillors, to include every producer and consumer of this particular kind of images—images of *ruins*.

[*Screening the Heygate*, an on-going archive of the Heygate's appearances on screens, available online: www.francescosebregondi.net/files/screening_the_heygate]

Page 8:

Tony Blair during his first speech as Prime Minister, in the Aylesbury estate, South London. June 2nd, 1997
Photograph: Stefan Rousseau/PA

Michael Caine in front of the Heygate. Main commercial image for the film *Harry Brown* (2009)

From the post-war massive reconstructions onwards, perhaps it is not so much history that produces ruins in its stormy passing—as Benjamin wrote—but the production of ruins that allows history to unfold.

"He walked up a ramp and started wandering around a circuit which, by means of intricate foldings and branchings, linked every volume together. Chearsley 42-60, Wingrave 1-48, Risborough 1-242, how many lives had this blank nomenclature encased, before returning to its abstraction? No, neither the broken TV sets and stained pieces of clothes scattered over the ground, nor the rumour of a few desperate phantoms still nesting here and there, were enough to reanimate this big machine. It just didn't function anymore, there laid its appeal. Gears and cogs bare naked, still. What was there was an absence, a solid one, one he could walk into, sit upon, run through, hop over, or just stare at—filling it with his own fears and desires. Cocky skyscrapers and garish condos were already peeping over the flat roofs, impatiently waiting for their final collapse. This place was no more than some latent room for the city to bloat, and thereby erase its deserted past. This place had no present of its own, he was inventing it." [12]

In the ruins of the Heygate, the material conditions of the complex are unimpaired. Only visible are traces of disuse, mainly cosmetic ones: out-of-order elevators, overgrown vegetation, a few broken windows... No forensics would be able to determine the cause of death of this architecture, why the various fluxes it used to channel suddenly ceased. Neither could it provide an irrefutable argument in favour of its execution, like a risk of structural collapse or a hazardous level of asbestos. A more questionable expertise, that of improvised architectural critics, was invoked to support the sentence. According to Lend Lease, Southwark Council's commercial partner in the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle:

"The revolutionary ideas of the 1960s have not stood the test of time. Instead, the developments have, on the whole, made life more difficult for local residents, and discouraged people from visiting the Elephant and Castle. [...]
In June 2002, Southwark Council decided the only way to improve the Elephant and Castle was to remove the physical barriers blighting the area, and approach the design and layout afresh. These barriers include:
— outdated, badly constructed buildings in need of massive investment;
— poor quality housing in dense estates; [...]
— a hostile environment, leading to crime and the fear of crime."[13]

Economics may be an opportune place to start some observations on the topic of ruins—precisely on their role and potential today.

Beyond the elegiac, romantic or commemorative accents that still tinge many modern discourses on ruins, ours begins with an elementary Marxist perspective. In a passage that throws a different light on the "removal of

[12]
Extract from a preparatory short-story for the present essay.

[13]
Lend Lease, 2011. [online] <http://www.elephantandcastle.org.uk/pages/elephant_castle/30/challenges.html>

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barriers" argued by Lend Lease, Harvey writes: "Capitalism as a mode of production has necessarily targeted the breaking down of spatial barriers and the acceleration of the turnover time as fundamental to its agenda of relentless capital accumulation."[14] Following this line of thought, ruins come into view as essential to capitalist production—not only of space but of any commodity—in as much as they allow replacement, resale, and a new cycle of profit. Since buildings and things don't fall into ruins fast enough, ruins are actively *constructed* upon materially sound objects—a process involving the ruination of their image, or their imaging as ruins. While it is now commonplace that the ever-shortening lifespan of our everyday objects is regulated by accurate business plans, the parallel with the production of our built environment seems banned from the discussion of architecture—as if the pressure of consumption did not affect such a noble enterprise, one only moved by the quest of the general interest. A revealing extract, from the Housing Report by the London Borough of Southwark Planning Division, dating back from 1973, at the time of the Heygate development:

"The owners of the block are already contesting compulsory purchase and demolition of the Balfour street tenement, despite the years of neglect and the ever-worsening conditions for the people who live there. From their point of view the property represents a large capital investment. Ironically, if the Council were able to rehouse all these tenements tenants overnight, the value of that investment would rise many times over, since the blocks would be standing empty and could be sold for development. [...] In the long term there can be only one practical answer, for the Borough of Southwark to acquire and demolish these antiquated tenements, and put in their place homes where the people of Southwark can be both healthy and happy."

Thirty years later, those "healthy and happy" homes have become "outdated", "poor quality housing", and a 170-acre area around the Elephant & Castle roundabout is labeled an "Opportunity Area". Here becomes clear the fundamentally conservative dimension of urban development/regeneration: once the obsolete is designated and an update is called for, it is imperative for the newly built forms to allow an ulterior reproduction of that very cycle. In which corrosive terms will the forthcoming "thriving and successful urban quarter"[15] be described in, let us guess, 2030?

This absorption of ruins within a generalised capitalist mode of production calls us to reverse the classic framing of the relation between ruins and history. From the post-war massive reconstructions onwards, perhaps it is not so much history that produces ruins in its stormy passing—as Benjamin wrote [16]—but *the production of ruins that allows history to unfold.* And isn't this precisely

[14]
HARVEY, D. (1996)
Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference
London: Blackwell. P. 411.

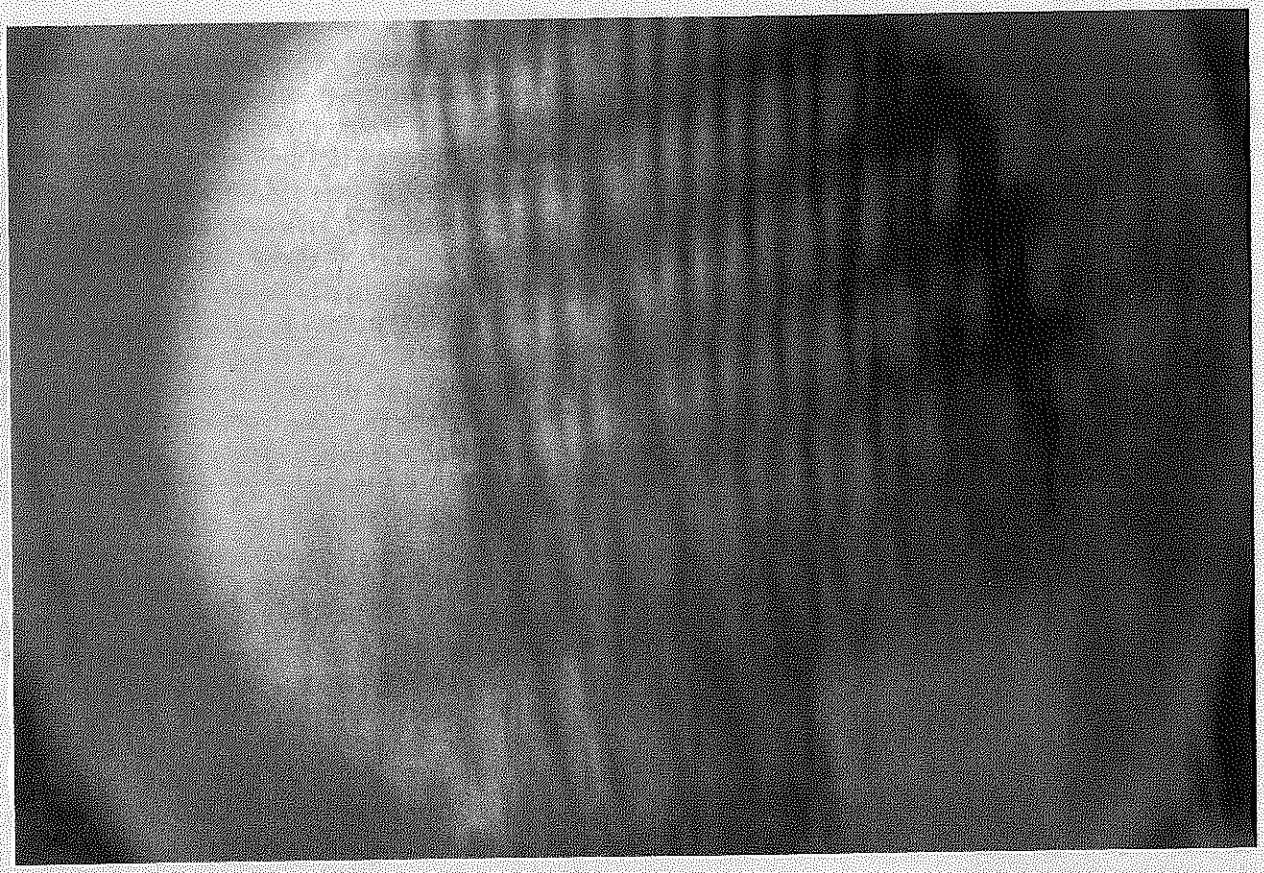
[15]
Lend Lease, 2011. [online]
<http://www.elephantandcastle.org.uk/pages/regeneration_change/43/objectives.html>

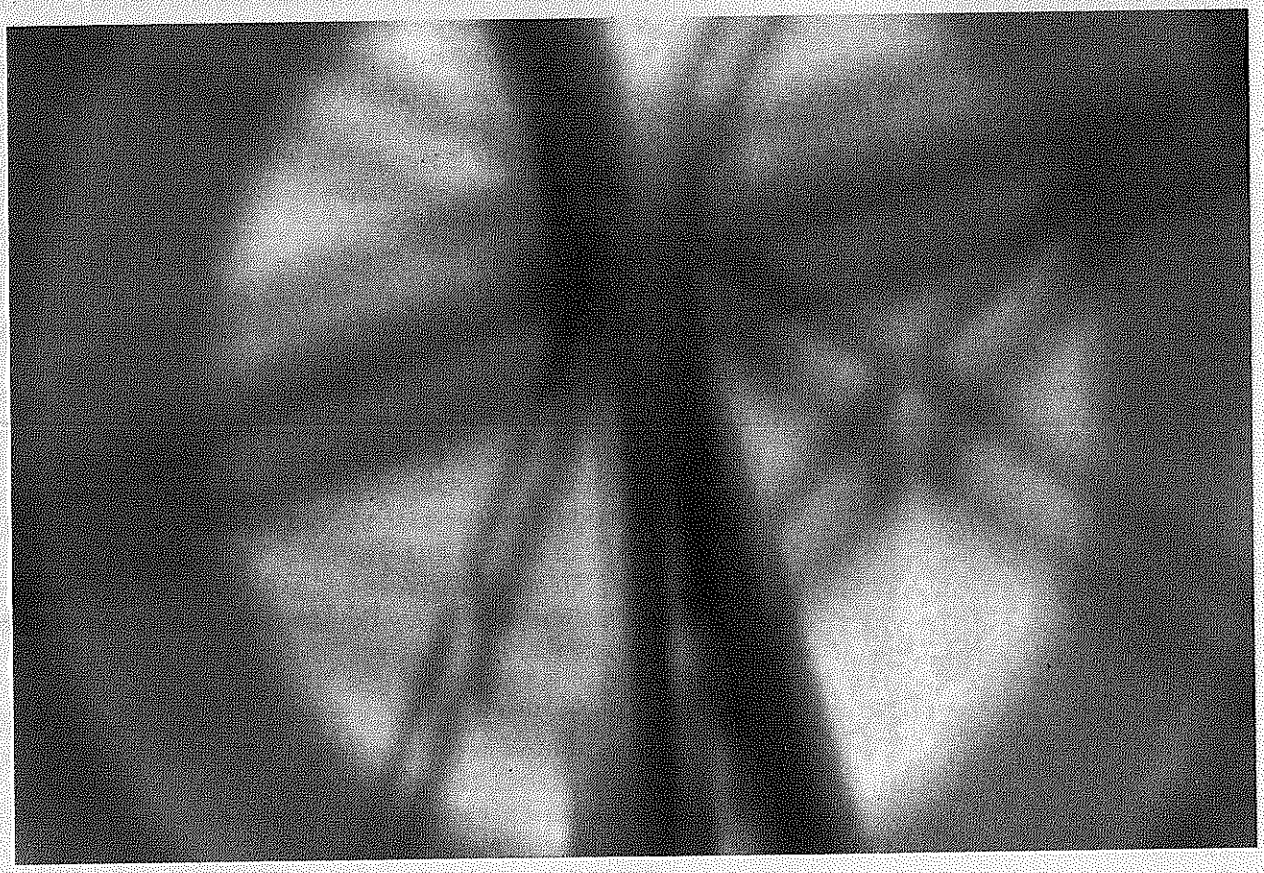
[16]
BENJAMIN, W. (1940)
"On the Concept of History" in
Selected Writings—Vol.4 1938-1940
Translated by H. Zohn (2003) Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
P. 392: "There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus.* It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm."

Page 12:

Pollock St. SE17
(future Heygate site), 1966

Pollock St. SE17 evacuated,
before demolition, 1969





what numerous artists have been sensing from the 1960s onwards, by re-engaging with ruins—most notably Smithson and its visions of "ruins in reverse" [17]? In Corman's 1963 movie *X: The Man With X-Ray Eyes,* we find a dialogue that could potentially have inspired Smithson's famous piece. While the two characters speak, on the screen appears the distorted vision of X, in which we recognise a steel-structure building in construction:

"—What do you see?
—The city... as if it were unborn, rising into the sky with fingers of metal... limbs without flesh, girders without stone... signs hanging without supports, wires dipping and swaying without poles... the city unborn, flesh dissolved in an acid of light... the city of the dead."

The city in the making seen as "the city of the dead". As if the changes taking place were in advance perceived as pure reproduction of the same, conservation of a fixed structure, excluding creation, excluding *life.* Curious resonance with Nietzsche's warning against the abuse of monumental history and against its devotees—whose motto he interpreted as: "let the dead bury the living" [18]. Aren't we still prey to the same abuse? Shouldn't we look at all the quickly-built, quickly-ruined artefacts in our cities as true *monuments,* to the perpetuity of capitalism itself?

Squeezed between its reconstructed past and its speculative future, the Heygate is nonetheless still accessible as a material place. Now bypassed by the streams of the city, it forms a hole in its fabric, a suspended place. There, one leaves the *present,* the idea of a joint in the course of time that allows it to flow from past to future: the past of the place has stopped there, its future is being developed, but the two are not yet bridged by an element of continuity, like the unfolding of everyday life. One has entered a peculiar gap—perhaps that of *becoming.*

By becoming we mean what is not anymore and not yet, this shift in being, through which potentials are actualised. We know that "becoming does not belong to history" [19]. It escapes it. And perhaps ruins are so fascinating precisely because they constitute an articulation between history and becoming. If ruins allow the *making of history,* that is, the construction and reconstruction of pasts and futures, it is because they essentially exist *outside of history,* out of the set of determining conditions of the present. Since it is both indeterminate and non-determinant, there can be no present in ruins. Their experience is one of pure becoming, our surroundings cease to be the frame of an established actuality. By losing its support from the present, our identity is itself suspended, and called to be reinvented [20]. As a counter-part to the imaging of the past with a view to ordain the present—the Heygate's visual exploitation as paradigm—

[17]
SMITHSON, R. (1967)
"A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" in FLAM, J. ed. (1996)
Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings
Berkeley: University of California Press.

[18]
NIETZSCHE, F. (1874)
"On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in BREAZEALE, D. ed. (1997)
Untimely meditations
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 72.

[19]
DELEUZE, G./ GUATTARI, F. (1991)
"Geophilosophy" in *What is Philosophy?*
Translated by G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson (1994), London: Verso.
P. 96: "Becoming does not belong to history. History today still designates only the set of conditions, however recent they may be, from which one turns away in order to become, that is to say, in order to create something new. [...] The event itself needs becoming as an unhistorical element. The unhistorical, Nietzsche says, 'is like an atmosphere within which alone life can germinate and with the destruction of which it must vanish.' It is like a moment of grace; and what 'deed would man be capable of if he had not first entered into that vaporous region of the unhistorical?'"

[20]
DERRIDA, J. (1990)
Memoirs of a Blind: the self-portrait and other ruins
Translated by P.-A. Brault and M. Naas (1993), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
P. 68-69: "Whence the love of ruins. And the fact that the scopic pulsion, voyeurism itself, is always on the lookout for the originary ruin. A narcissistic melancholy, a memory—in mourning—of love itself. How to love anything other than the possibility of ruin? Than an impossible totality? [...] The ruin is not in front of us; it is neither a spectacle nor a love object. It is experience itself: neither the abandoned yet still monumental fragment of a totality, nor, as Benjamin thought, simply a theme of baroque culture. It is precisely not a theme, for it ruins the theme, the position, the presentation or representation of anything and everything. Ruin is, rather, this memory open like an eye, or like the hole in a bone socket that lets you see without showing you anything at all, anything of the all. This, for showing you nothing at all, nothing of the all."

Page 14:

Two stills from
X: The Man With X-Ray Eyes
(1963)

another process of *imagination* can take place among ruins, in which one's subjectivity is at stakes. Sheltered within those folds of the present, any prefigured or expected identity is immediately made void, which leaves room for the "relation to oneself, or the affect on self by self" [21]. Far from being a matter of closed-circuit introspection, this relation consists of opening oneself to an absolute outside, one that is yet to come. Here resides the political dimension of ruins, in as much as they materialise an ephemeral void—of norms, of conventions, of determinations—through which new subjects may come forth. While they represent an immense potential to capitalise on, ruins also present a counter-potential that is just as vast—a place outside of history to re-invent oneself as a subject.

[21]
DELEUZE, G. (1986)
"Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)" in
Foucault, Translated by S. Hand (1988),
London: The Athlone Press. P. 107

Left to rot for years in such a public setting, the Heygate's corpse is assigned a clear role: to narrate its own defeat, and to redirect our gaze towards a more glittering horizon.

It takes some observation skills to realise that the Heygate is still accessible today: at first sight, every former way in seems barred by dark blue hoardings. A closer look reveals that a few breaches are arranged, so that the last residents may still get to their home, albeit by tortuous paths. Each time a new flat is emptied it is immediately sealed off—by means of half-inch thick metal plates welded onto every door and window—together with the portion of walkway that was only needed for its access. This way, the circulation in the blocks has been methodically reduced to the strict indispensable minimum. In order to discourage potential climbers, rotating spikes have been installed on cornices. Having already had to deal with squatters who re-occupied emptied flats [22], Southwark Council took drastic measures to secure the void in the Heygate: "24 hour live security patrols", and an actively maintained layer of defensive architecture covering the original one.

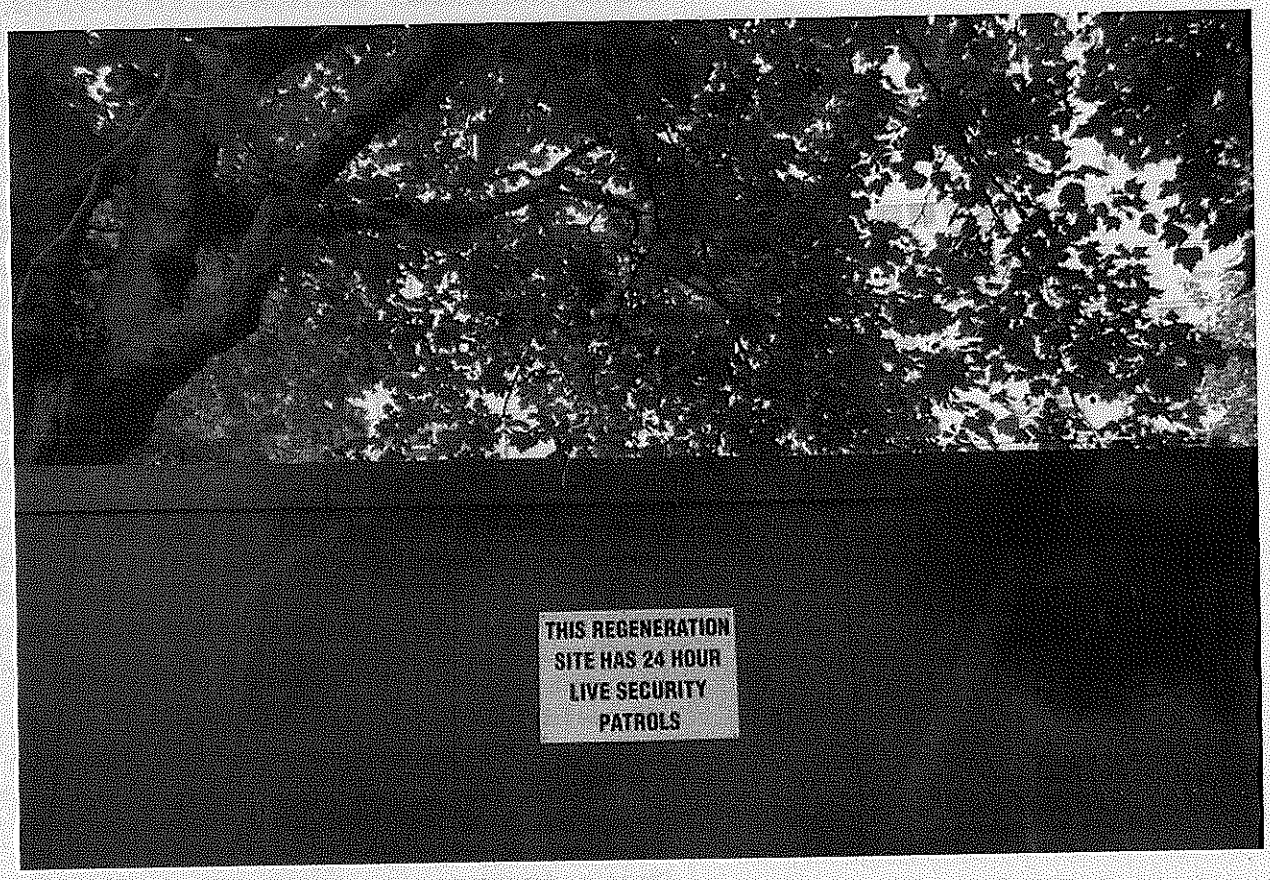
Yet the argument of the defence against squatters doesn't explain why the whole site of the Heygate, with its vast open space and its hundreds of London Planes, is so carefully concealed behind miles of hoardings—especially since those don't actually bar, but only hamper the access to the estate. On Southwark Council's website, one can read: "A planning application was submitted in May 2011 for the erection of a new 3m security fence that will enclose the three vacant Kingshill, Swanborne and Wansey Street blocks." And regarding the blocks that are not yet vacant: "We are still engaging with the few remaining residents across these blocks in order to facilitate a satisfactory move off the estate. Once vacant a planning application will be submitted for the erection of a security fence, similar to that installed around Phase one and two." [23] It seems like the diffused intelligence overseeing the regeneration senses the disruptive potential of a void in the city—of a sudden slackening of the norms and control regulating the urban experience—and does its best to keep the curious away. The Heygate shall not be approached, but only seen from the distance. The Heygate shall only appear as a *landscape*.

"Landscape doesn't merely signify or symbolize power relations, it is an instrument of cultural power", writes Mitchell [24]. The 12-storey high, 180-meter long Claydon block, now completely vacant and sealed off, stands right in front of the Elephant & Castle rail station, parallel to the tracks. Between the two, a long hoarding encloses a construction site which, although unrelated to the Heygate's demolition, makes the whole estate look already fenced off. From the elevated platform of the station, one can enjoy a far-reaching view: in the background, the monumental corpse of the Claydon block; in the foreground, a bird's eye view of the construction workers laying the foundations of the new Oakmayne Plaza; and turning one's eyes toward Central London, the unending rise of the Shard over the horizon.

[22]
SUTHERLAND, P. ed. (2008)
Home. Elephant & Castle
London: London College of Communication.

[23]
Southwark Council, 2011 [online]
<http://www.southwark.gov.uk/info/200183/elephant_and_castle/1124/heygate_estate/3>

[24]
MITCHELL, W.J.T. (1994)
Landscape and Power
Second edition (2002)
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
P. 1-2: "[The question is not] what landscape 'is' or 'means', but what it does, how it works as a cultural practice. Landscape, we suggest, doesn't merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human intentions. Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site."


THIS REGENERATION
SITE HAS 24 HOUR
LIVE SECURITY
PATROLS

[25]
Lend Lease,
Transforming the Heygate(2011) [online]
<http://www.elephantandcastle.org.uk/pages/consultation_dialogue/67/elephant_castle.html>

Tens of thousands of commuters pass everyday by this landscape which indeed, doesn't simply expose how things are, but asserts how things will inescapably be. Every gap is bridged or capped. The passage from concrete estates to glass towers is framed as a relation of continuity, a smooth transition, a natural and irresistible progress. *There is no alternative.* The past is already gone, the future is already there: just watch it happen—and strive to be part of it. Left to rot for years in such a public setting, the Heygate's corpse is assigned a clear role: to narrate its own defeat, and to redirect our gaze towards a more glittering horizon.

All around the Heygate, the blind facades of the massive blocks serve as a valorising background for everything being built. The architectural imperative of the new development is to show a radical contrast of appearance with the council estate's aesthetics—as developed through films and photographs, just as materially staged on site. Most assuredly, with all its windows welded and its walkways locked behind bars, the Heygate couldn't better suggest dereliction. But right across the street, a bright multicolour facade promises a bright multicolour future for the area. Low- to mid-rise housing is now sprouting up around the Heygate, manifesting an absolute disavowal of the modernist parenthesis—even in its most laudable of principles, like the honesty of materials. The cheap motley claddings covering some utterly banal pieces of architecture say it all about the kind of improvement aimed at in the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle: one of facade.

Perhaps more striking: on the official website of the regeneration, just like in its temporary consultation hub, a collection of graphics are displayed, that are meant to give artists' impressions of the future constructions on site [25]. Yet, for the vast majority, they hardly disclose any information about the actual architecture to be built. A cheerful use of colours, children and trees in the foreground, but very few traces of an architectural *project* on which to be consulted. In fact, the planning submission for the Heygate site is only scheduled for Spring 2012. Apart from the conditions of its financial viability, nothing has been even drafted yet about the architecture that will replace the Heygate. How peculiar: to execute a place and force out its inhabitants on the basis of its insufferable architecture, five years before proposing a project to replace it. But this naive good sense is worthless if one is to grasp some basics of property speculation and assess the true value of these gap years. The regeneration of the Elephant & Castle was announced as early as 2004, in a preliminary step. Then in 2007, the core operation occurred: the production of a void. Around it, the empty blocks of the Heygate began to work as a dyke, retaining the pressure of the market, letting it rise on its edges. Property developers and investors started bidding, making the speculative value of a square foot of that void

Page 20:

The Heygate from the platform of the Elephant & Castle rail station, May 2011

A typical fence encircling the Heygate, May 2011

skyrocket. In parallel, another process was to unfold, the ruination of the image of the old Elephant. This way, regardless of the quality in absolute terms of what will be built, its relative value is pushed to its extreme. Once the market pressure has reached its limit, pull down the dyke, demolish the blocks, inundate the void, let the transactions flow and the profit explode. When pondering this regeneration, one cannot but acknowledge how richer the architectural reflection is in the design of a financial package, than in that of a place.

Speculation is by nature twofold. Around the Heygate, it involves the projection of two symmetrical images: on the one hand, the ruined image of its past; on the other, its inverted reflection, the auspicious image of its future. Out of their potential difference, a current of capitals is generated, which preexists the more or less faithful material transformation of the area, and indeed, necessitates a spatial and temporal gap. Exceptionally valuable to the processes of speculation, such gaps are concealed and secured in the city. But where some only see a gap—the temporary interruption of a prefigured process that allows its intensification—others will find a void—the unhistorical locus of absolute potentials, a milieu for the new to emerge. The multiplication of urban regenerations has turned the whole city into a speculative landscape which, by its omnipresence, denies the possibility of an alternative transformation of the city. Yet if one were to act in this direction, perhaps could one start by piercing holes in that inhibiting landscape, and intrude into the many voids it screens.

Fighting for the use that will be made of the Heygate's site, or, through a practice of the void as such, getting acquainted with the still laughable idea of not using, exploiting or programming every single square foot of the city?

As tenuous as they may be, there are currently still some uses of the Heygate's void—it even hosts a few local political efforts. One cannot but mention the resistance of the last residents to their eviction, without which the whole estate would already be fenced off. Besides, sometime in the course of last spring, "guerilla gardeners" have started taking over portions of the Heygate's green space, to grow flowers and small kitchen gardens. A few months later, such actions developed into the "Elephant & Castle Urban Forest" campaign, which promotes the value of the 450 mature trees hidden behind the estate's slabs, and lobbies for their conservation in the design of the regeneration projects [26]. The campaign is also supported by the Elephant Amenity Network, self-described as a group of "action for a regeneration that benefits local people"[27].

These undertakings constitute the main axis of the political activity that challenges the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle. When setting it against the discourse sketched in this essay, we find ourselves in front of an inescapable question, which splits politics into two separate—yet not exclusive—trajectories: negotiating towards the possible, or demanding the impossible? Struggling upon the modalities of exploitation within a given regime, or searching for an outside, a tangent axis of liberation? Or more specifically in our case: fighting for the *use* that will be made of the Heygate's site, or, through a practice of the void as such, getting acquainted with the still laughable idea of *not* using, exploiting or programming every single square foot of the city?

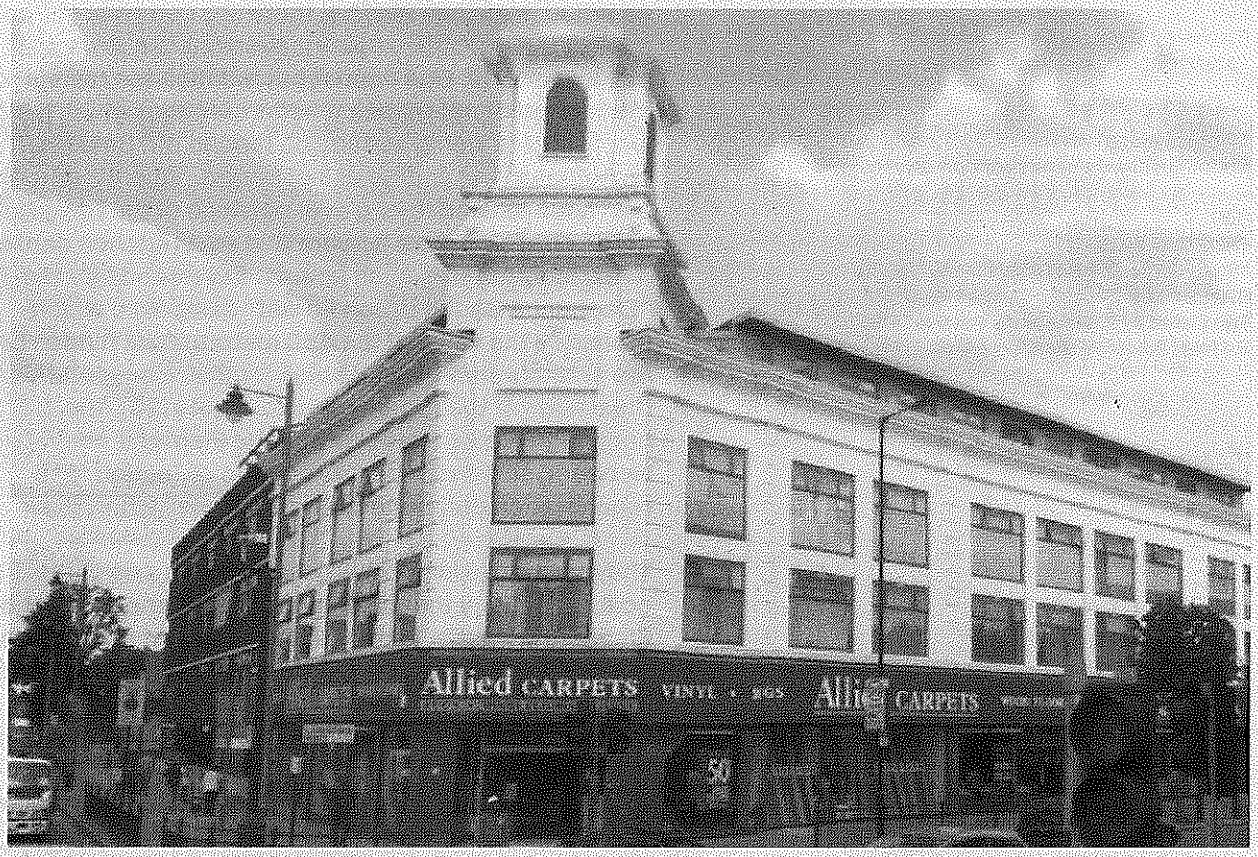
While always latent, these questions have gained a broader resonance in the past twenty years, with the emergence of subjectivity as an essential stake for the reinvention of politics in the time of global capitalism. The shattering of former structures of reference—particularly that of *class* and of *social body*—has obscured both the means and the hopes of a contemporary political practice. As a consequence, we westerners seem to oppose ever less resistance to our capture by reticulate apparatuses of subjectivation, and to our collective conditioning as docile consumers. Perhaps more than ever, there is today a vital need to *experiment*, in every field of human activity, with a view to overcome our present infertility of transformative concepts and practices, and to work towards a "reappropriation of the means of production of subjectivity"[28]. However, it is not the place here to insist on the importance of such endeavours: our specific concern is to question what architecture can do in this horizon.

It might seem too early, or too late, to ask this question—considering the apolitical character of the architectural profession, whose civil implication hardly goes beyond the promotion of well-meaning slogans: "participation" yesterday, "sustainability" today.

[26]
Elephant & Castle Urban Forest, 2011 [online]
<http://elephantandcastleurbanforest.com>

[27]
Elephant Amenity Network, 2011 [online]
<http://elephantamenity.wordpress.com>

[28]
GUATTARI, F. (1992)
"On the Production of Subjectivity" in
Chaosmosis
Translated by P.Bains and J. Pefanis (1995)
Sydney: Power Publications. P. 13


Allied CARPETS
Allied CARPETS

How could architects join the avant-garde recasting of politics in the complex field of financial and semio-capitalism, they who have long-abandoned even the most traditional forms of politicisation? Who have accepted a regime of production of space in which their role is only to provide answers, to ready-made programmes, and never to ask questions? And yet, because the architecture of the urban environment constitutes an excessively powerful apparatus of subjectivation—what Baudrillard once called the "operational semiology" of our system [29]—we cannot let its ruling unfold in the mist-enveloped world of planning administrations, and its discussion be reduced to issues of attractiveness. It is urgent to reactivate architecture as a field of political praxis.

Thankfully, we don't have to wait for architects to do it. Weren't the riots that raged through Britain during four nights in early August, the most radical architectural intervention the country has seen in years, and an outright activation of the city's materiality as a field of politics? In the following weeks, an avalanche of indignant comments and leaden sentences have tried to reduce the riots to an outburst of unprovoked violence, negating its political dimension on the basis of its lack of articulated claims. Perhaps there is no need to reformulate the subtler counter-analysis of this recurrent event, which recognises the strategic insight of looters and vandals in their defetishising attack on commodity, and locates its radical political character precisely in the *emptiness of its content,* its non-adhesion to the canons of communication, which forces the very language of politics to be reconfigured [30]. In fact, the rioters did not resist, but accelerated capitalist processes up to their point of rupture. They further sped up the voracious consumerism promoted all over the city, hopping over the crucial gap of the purchase and thereby making void the whole contract of the capital. Likewise, imitating what the city enacts and displays to regenerate itself, they *produced ruins.* Windows smashed, buildings and vehicles set on fire, the city in its most candid appearance ruined, as if all wrong, to be torn down and started again from scratch. But a ruin all at once this time, undoing the possibility to capitalise on it. No gap, just an immediate void. All laws and norms, all records and prospects, simply vanished like the sun at night, for a taste of bare and crude freedom. The event has nothing to do with *what happened,* which we can only account afterwards, but lies in the very void, proclaimed and diffused to whole urban areas. The fact that it occurred in London, perhaps the most controlled and surveilled city in the world, makes it even more significant, even more political. It had to occur in order to be proven possible—and perhaps its firebrands did so precisely because *they didn't know it was impossible.* If chaos in London is likely, then truly anything is, surely more than the raid of electronic stores. "Disentangling the possible from the capital", to use the words of Franco Berardi [31],

[29]
BAUDRILLARD, J. (1976)
"Kool Killer, or the insurrection of signs" in
Symbolic Exchange and Death
Translated by M.Gane (1993)
London: Sage Publications.
P. 77: "There's a horizontal and vertical expansion of the city, in the image of the economic system itself. Political economy, however, has a third dimension where all sociality is invested, covered and dismantled by signs. Neither architecture nor urbanism can do anything about this, since they themselves result from this new turn taken by the general economy of the system: they are its operational semiology."

[30]
DEBORD, G. (1965)
The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy
Unsigned tract first distributed in the USA in December 1965, following the Watts riots of August 1965. Reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste #10,* March 1966. Translated by K.Knabb.
"Once it is no longer bought, the commodity lies open to criticism and alteration, whatever particular form it may take. Only when it is paid for with money is it respected as an admirable fetish, as a symbol of status within the world of survival. Looting is a *natural* response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. It instantly undermines the commodity as such, and it also exposes what the commodity ultimately implies: the army, the police and the other specialized detachments of the state's monopoly of armed violence."

Also, BAUDRILLARD, J. (1976)
"Kool Killer, or the insurrection of signs" in
Symbolic Exchange and Death
op. cit.
P. 80: "So it was no accident that the total offensive was accompanied by a recession in terms of content. This comes from a sort of revolutionary intuition, namely that deep ideology no longer functions at the level of political signifieds, but at the level of the signifier, and that this is where the system is vulnerable and must be dismantled."

[31]
Franco Berardi "Bifo" in conversation with Nina Power, August 28th, 2011 at Auto Italia South East, London SE 1.

Page 26:

Allied Carpets store building on Tottenham High Road, 2010

The same building on the night of 6th-7th August 2011
[Source: The Guardian]

is perhaps one of our main contemporary problems. Once again, it took a bunch of angry youths and their heedless *pensée en acte* to open a breach in it.

When a State apparatus is even slightly menaced, every liberal democracy seems to follow the explicit order by Hillary Clinton, commenting on the imminent insurrection in Egypt: *there must be no void* [32]. As soon as a void is opened, it must either be concealed or immediately filled with an order similar to the one which preexisted it. The reestablishment of a State order transforms a void into a gap, at the same time as it relaunches the suspended historical narrative. In fact, there is an inherent risk in opening a void for both the State apparatuses and their opponents: if the latter don't succeed in their foolish enterprise—not a simple revolution, but the eradication of the State-form, which of course never happened *in history* [33]—the momentary void will allow the State to further tighten its grip over its subjects; reciprocally, while the State must constantly grant new gaps to the market for it to regenerate itself, it does so running the risk to see those gaps trespassed and practiced as voids. The management of this risk can take subtle and intricate forms. Among the measures taken in its iron backlash over the riots, the government authorised the eviction of accused rioters' families from their social housing [34]—thereby taking advantage of the state of shock in which the country was plunged to implement exceptional policies, and further accelerate the dismantlement of every non-profitable public service. Once the void reoccupied, it is put to use to actualise other latent but planned gaps. We can already foresee how these evacuated accommodations prepare a flexible, micro-regeneration, in line with the implacable expansion of *democratic liberalism*—the partnership between the ungraspable ether of the market, and the unescapable grip of State forces.

And yet, perhaps the riots did not *fail*. It would be simplistic to consider the rebellious production of a void as worthless if not immediately followed by a change of order, or worst, as in the recent case, if ending up in the exacerbation of the former. Such reasoning would omit the subjective transformations that the void allowed for a timeless instant. With fierce prison sentences, the magistracy now puts all its efforts into remoulding tame subjects and docile bodies, in order to erase any trace of that sudden wildness. Yet in spite of it all, there is an unseizable excess in the event which, albeit almost imperceptibly, managed to shake Britain's subjectivities from within their folds. A glimpse was caught of an unthinkable possible. May this spark light more fires, may they consume the blank stare we throw at a convulsing reality, before our customary indolence is regenerated.

[32]
Hillary Clinton interviewed on FOX News Sunday—January 30th, 2011: "We want to see an orderly transition so that no-one fills a void, that there not be a void, that there be a well thought-out plan that will bring about a democratic participatory government" <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/fox-news-sunday/transcript/secretary-state-hillary-clinton-speaker-house-john-boehner-talk-egypt-crisis>

[33]
CLASTRES, P. (1974)
Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology
Translated R.Hurley and A.Stein (1977) Oxford: Blackwell.
P. 186-7:"It is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is the history of their struggle against the State".

[34]
TOPPING, A./WINTOUR, P. (2011)
London riots: Wandsworth council moves to evict mother of charged boy
The Guardian, 12 August [online]
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/12/london-riots-wandsworth-council-eviction>

HATHERLEY, O. (2011)
Evicting rioters' families from their homes? There's a horrible logic to it
The Guardian, 16 August [online]
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/16/evict-rioters-families>

Page 28:

Tahrir Square, 10 February 2011
Photograph: Johnathan Rashad

Tahrir Square, 21 November 2011
Photographer unknown

We tried here to consider the void from a material and spatial perspective, yet to articulate it with its conceptual and political potency, as a locus for the reconstruction of subjectivities and a milieu for the new to emerge. Studies of vacant, equivocal or indeterminate spaces are not new, and arose out of very different currents of thought [35]. Far from forgetting this legacy, our aim is to weave its conceptual impulses into concrete practices, so that they cease to exist only as distant fantasies for architects to muse. It is true that those places can only be discovered, or invented. Any attempt to plan or project them *as such* must face an irreducible paradox: their essence lays in that very absence of determination. Yet, if one were to suspend the categorical imperative stating that architects must *build*, and thinking their role first and foremost as that of creating spatial relations, void itself could become a project of architecture. One that would reactivate the space of the city as an open field of possibles, not as a frame of options. In the context of an urban condition becoming the absolute human condition, and tending towards a regime of smooth yet incessant control, perhaps one of the most urgent task for architects is not to design places that are better-integrated to the contemporary city, but precisely to discover, invent, and invite to its ephemeral voids.

In this conception of architecture, time is not something to be endured; it is activated, orientated, the object of qualitative change. Architecture is no longer the transferential projections of forms as a function of a preexisting, latent content, but the invention of new catalytic nuclei capable of bifurcating existence. A singularity, a rupture of sense, a cut, a fragmentation, the detachment of a semiotic content—in a dadaist or surrealist manner—can originate mutant nuclei of subjectivation. [36]

[35] FOUCAULT, M. (1967)
Of Other Spaces
Translated by J.Miskowiec (1986) Diacritics (Spring).

BEY, H. (1991)
The Temporary Autonomous Zone
Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

DE SOLA-MORALES, I. (1995)
Terrain Vague in *AnyPlace C*,
London: Davidson MIT Press.

KOTANYI, A / VANEIGEM, R. (1961)
Elementary Program of the Unitary Urbanism Office
Translated by T. McDonough (2009),
The Situationists and the City, London: Verso.
P. 148: "All space is already occupied by the enemy, who has domesticated it for its own use down to the elementary rules of this space (beyond legal authority, to geometry itself). The moment of authentic urbanism's appearance will be the creation, in certain areas, of the absence of this occupation. What we call construction starts there. It can be understood with the help of the concept of 'positive void' invented by modern physics. Materializing liberty means first shielding from a domesticated planet a few small fragments of its surface."

[36] GUATTARI, F. (1992)
"On the Production of Subjectivity" in *Chaosmosis*,
op. cit.
P.18, the original quote concerns psychoanalysis, yet its transfer to architecture seems relevant:
"In this conception of analysis, time is not something to be endured; it is activated, orientated, the object of qualitative change. Analysis is no longer the transferential interpretation of symptoms as a function of a preexisting, latent content, but the invention of new catalytic nuclei capable of bifurcating existence. A singularity, a rupture of sense, a cut, a fragmentation, the detachment of a semiotic content—in a dadaist or surrealist manner—can originate mutant nuclei of subjectivation."

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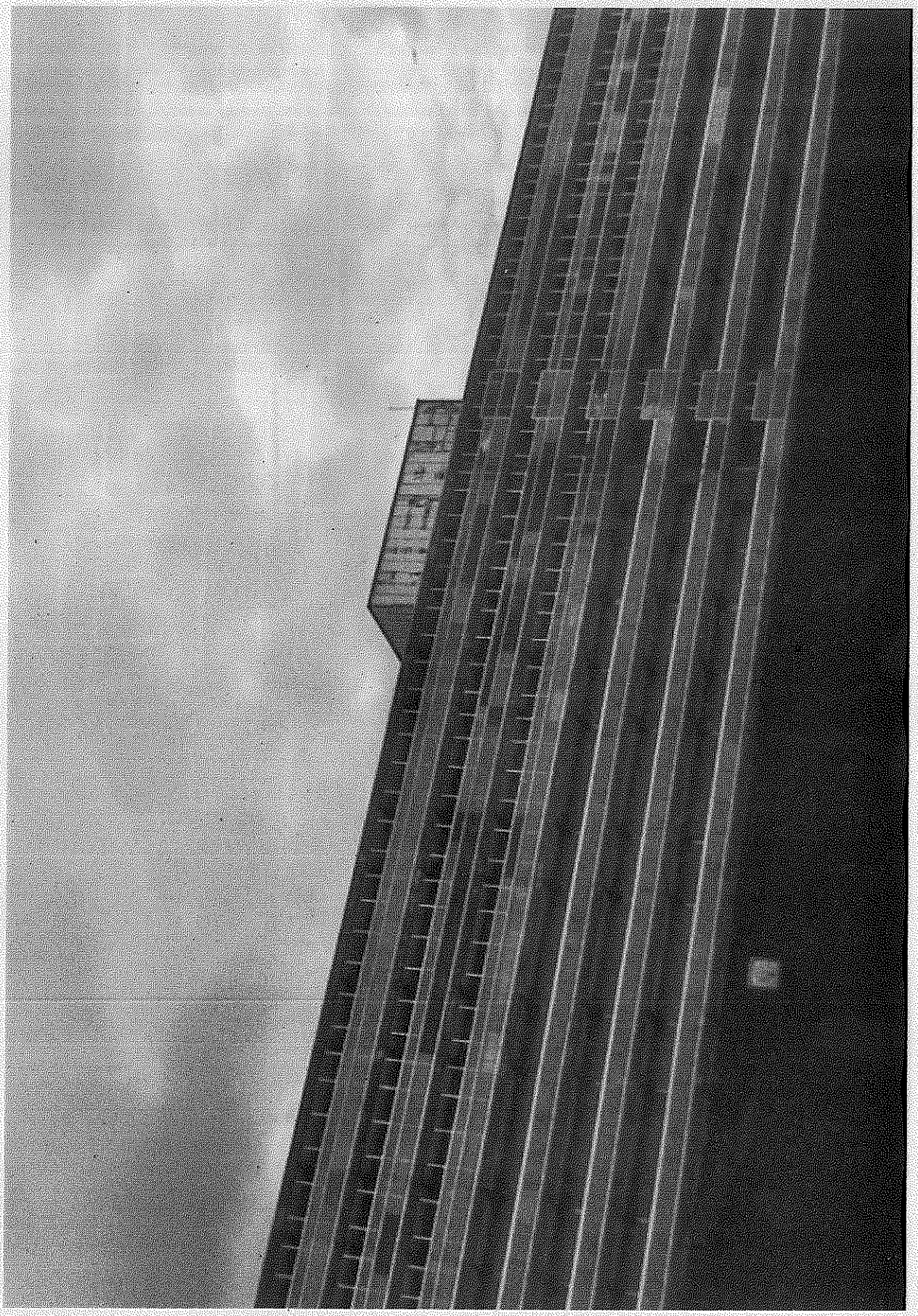

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