



Doctoral Dissertation  
Doctoral Program in Architecture, History and Project, 32<sup>nd</sup> Cycle

# **Unpacking Robin Hood Gardens**

The troubled history of a British public housing project  
(1952) 1963-1972 (2018)

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## SUMMARY

The Robin Hood Gardens complex (RHG), which was built in 1972 in the Poplar district, East London, commissioned by the main administrative body of the Greater London Council, is the only public housing built project by the English architect couple Alison and Peter Smithson. Since 2006, the owners and administrators of the complex, in view of the conditions of degradation of the structure and their intentions to extensively redevelop the area around the Blackwall Tunnel – near which the complex sits – proposed its demolition. A heated debate was to rage for almost ten years, not only in important sector journals (above all *Building Design* with its campaign in favour of protecting them) but also in newspapers and radio and television broadcasts, among those who, on the one hand, considered the complex incapable of offering a good quality of living, an abject failure of ideas and intentions whose only merit was that it was formulated by architects of some renown, and, on the other, those who championed its preservation because they regarded it as an exemplar to be safeguarded for the values it encompassed.

Very quickly the questions raised would end up proliferating the points of view and considerations by turning the spotlight back on the work and its designers while leaving the actual object of the dispute in the background.

In spite of the wide range of articles and interventions dealing with RHG – each time according to a different interpretative slant – to date no research work has systematically explored what the project actually was and what it meant to its authors.

The research for *Unpacking Robin Hood Gardens* aimed firstly at returning to primary and secondary sources, organizing and studying them to offer them within a coherent account which, from the first studies formulated in response to a commission called the Manisty Street Project (1963), ended with the completion of RHG (1972), then the presentation of the project by its authors and the critical and historiographical reception in the first ten years from its occupation.

Given the sheer bulk and diversity of the material collected, the research decided to tackle it by distinguishing three levels of reading: the project, the themes, and the interpretations.

Part one is based almost exclusively on archive documents, and chronologically traces the entire history of the project, the result of a collaboration between the Smithsons and the public administration, professional firms, and construction companies. Official paperwork (memoranda, reports...) and the preparatory drawings submitted mark a story which was interwoven with important internal changes to the institutions, updated standards of living, and changes in construction techniques.

The main design themes which would be reflected in RHG and which have often been the subject of contention in the debate are the subject of part two. The result of more than ten years of theoretical research by architects, the main compositional choices are analysed by making a direct comparison with the unrealized projects which proposed a first formulation ahead of their time (1952-1962).

Finally, the third and last part deals with the many writings which would accompany the Poplar complex throughout the first ten years of its life, distinguishing between descriptions proposed by the authors themselves, who explained their intentions and meanings (1968-1972), the first comments of the critics gauging the result (1970-1973), to arrive at the assessments of the architectural historians who defined its position within their own reconstructions (1972-1982). Hence, in clearing out the Smithsons' work, *Unpacking Robin Hood Gardens* is a first attempt to bring a semblance of order to a project whose final judgement is still pending.