

Acquisition Justification

Alison + Peter Smithson, architects

A fragment of the Robin Hood Gardens housing estate, Poplar, London

This acquisition would entail the removal and preservation of part of a section of Robin Hood Gardens, a residential council estate located in Poplar, Tower Hamlets, London that is slated for total demolition. The two slab buildings comprising Robin Hood Gardens were designed by Alison + Peter Smithson between 1969 and 1974. Robin Hood Gardens is considered one of Britain's most important Brutalist works of architecture, and is one of the few built works by a British architectural partnership that was highly influential in twentieth-century world architecture.

Alison + Peter Smithson

Wife and husband Alison (1928 –1993) and Peter Smithson (1923 – 3 March 2003) formed an architectural partnership that led to British New Brutalism (often simply called Brutalism) in the latter half of the twentieth century. Alison + Peter Smithson first came to prominence with Hunstanton School, Norfolk (1949-54), a stripped down Miesian structure which was rough and ready in appearance, a challenge to the sleek and smooth Modernism admired at the time. In 1956, with Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson, they created an installation in the influential *This is Tomorrow* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, showing found objects as a comment on fractured space. The same year they created *The House of the Future* in an exhibition.

The Smithsons were great design rebels, writing and lecturing worldwide on their views; the older generation are still divided over the Smithsons' legacy, the younger generation consider them heroes of the architectural age. Their politics and dogma gained them few commissions for architects of their stature, but did include the highly praised Economist Building in St James's, London (1959-65). The Robin Hood Estate is their ultimate and only built statement on social housing.

Robin Hood Gardens - background

Design: Robin Hood Gardens is located in the southeast quarter of Poplar, on a difficult site flanked on the east with the northern Blackwall Tunnel approach, and on the west with the busy trunk road bordering the north-eastern corner of Canary Wharf. Commissioned by the Greater London Council (GLC), at Robin Hood Gardens Alison + Peter Smithson instituted their ideas on social housing for which they had been widely known since the early 1950s, particularly 'the building as street': flats accessed by wide access decks where residents could meet, enhanced by the entry doors to flats facing one another in pairs.

The estate consists of two long curved buildings facing each other over a green space. The exterior finish is rough shuttered concrete precast in large pieces on the Swedish Sundh system. All the flats are maisonettes, on two levels. The inward-looking facades of both blocks are identical, as are the outward facades. Although the roadside and garden facades are different, both are characterised by the repeating grid of windows and doors. The outward sides have horizontal setbacks of walkways and the inward sides have continuous balcony/escape corridors. A major visual element is the vertical concrete ribs of varying lengths that act as noise deflectors, breaking up the symmetry and giving the facades an op art effect.

Archive: The full set of archival material for Robin Hood Gardens, including design and working drawings, photographs and project files, are held in the Alison + Peter Smithson archive,

Special Collections, Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University. In 1970, during construction of the estate, the BBC made a documentary on the estate ('Alison and Peter Smithson on Housing', 1970, available on YouTube).

The Fragment

The proposed portion for acquisition is a three-storey section comprising both facades and interior features of a flat (ie. cupboards, kitchen units, door surrounds, skirting boards) but not including floors and walls.

Significance of object and relevance to the V&A Collections

Robin Hood Gardens is a nationally important and internationally recognised work of Brutalist architecture, and is one of the few built works by a British architectural partnership of great influence in twentieth century world architecture. Prof Dirk van den Heuvel, a leading architectural historian on the period, writes:

*New Brutalism became the key architectural expression of the welfare state, and it was also from England that the idea of the New Brutalism was spread. This is due entirely to the leadership of the Smithsons ... Certainly, Robin Hood Gardens is among the top examples of British New Brutalism.*¹

The commission for Robin Hood Gardens gave Alison and Peter Smithson their only opportunity to create a council estate. This project was the culmination of their research on and vision for public housing. They regarded Robin Hood Gardens 'as a demonstration of a more enjoyable way of living ... a model, an exemplar, of a new mode of urban organisation.' The estate is distinctive for its complex plan and elevation, noise-reducing design features like exterior concrete fins, and for its elevated walkways, known as 'streets in the sky', intended to foster interaction between neighbours.

The decision to demolish Robin Hood Gardens was highly controversial. Architectural campaigners and amenity societies proposed that the building be listed and leading architects and historians defended the significance of the building. Heritage listing, however, was refused. Demolition was determined by a number of factors including lack of maintenance, cost of refurbishment versus new build, and rising land values. The demolition has prompted public debate on issues of housing, gentrification and changing attitudes to the welfare state. The V&A, as the leading museum of art, design and architecture, welcomes the opportunity to be able to exhibit the fragment and host further discussions about the future of architecture and our cities.

Acquiring a part of Robin Hood Gardens will bring the V&A's long tradition of collecting parts of important historical buildings, many of substantial size, into the contemporary moment. The fragment will join the façade of Sir Paul Pindar's House (c.1599), period rooms such as the Norfolk House Music Room (1757), and the Hereford Choir Screen (1862). This is a bold and opportune moment for the V&A to add a highly influential architectural example of great aesthetic and social significance to its collection.

The fragment will be complemented by a number of objects by the Smithsons already in the V&A. These include architectural drawings and a chair for The House of the Future (1956) and architectural drawings for the Economist Building (1960-61). The V&A has also acquired a number of pieces related to the demolition of Robin Hood Gardens including 'A Fall of Ordinairiness and Light'

¹ Dirk van den Heuvel, 'A Virgilian Cityscape', *Robin Hood Gardens Re-Visions*. London: The Twentieth Century Society, 2010,

and three 'Conversation Pieces' (2014) by Jessie Brennan as well as a photo-etched copper plate multiple titled 'Memorandum (Robin Hood Gardens)' (2017) by Charlie Warde.

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[NAME REDACTED]

Department of Design, Architecture and Digital
Victoria and Albert Museum
South Kensington
London SW7 2RL





Inward facing façade

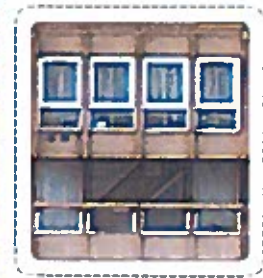


Outward facing façade



Interior of a maisonette





EXAMPLE of small fragment removal



Fragment scaled in Cast Court



London firms Haworth Tompkins and Metropolitan Workshop have each designed two buildings to replace the Brutalist Robin Hood Gardens estate

Replacement housing revealed for London's doomed Robin Hood Gardens

Dezeen, on-line, 4 August 2016

<https://www.dezeen.com/2016/08/04/replacement-revealed-brutalist-robin-hood-gardens-smithsons-haworth-tompkins-metropolitan-workshop/>

MATERIAL in the V&A Collections related to Alison + Peter Smithson

ICON

ARCHITECTURE	DESIGN	OPINION	DIARY	PRODUCTS	MEMO
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Robin Hood Gardens: 'They're driving us away to replace us with wealthy people'

COMMENT 30.11.15



For her new book, artist Jessie Brennan spent time with the residents of the Smithsons' brutalist estate to explore the human impact of the political battle over its regeneration. Here, she discusses her experience

Images

Jessie Brennan

Above: 'A Fall of Ordinairiness and Light' (The Fabling Power) 2014

"I felt emotional," admitted Abdul Kalam, former president of Robin Hood Gardens who collaborated with me for my project on the Smithsons' soon-to-be-demolished brutalist social housing estate in Poplar in November last year. "I couldn't email it to you. But you know what, I wanted to call you."

Images: 'A Fall of Ordinairiness and Light' (The Fabling Power) 2014

10.11.15, 10.11.15, 10.11.15

Kalam had just looked through a copy of our book, *Regeneration: Conversations, Drawings, Archives & Photographs* from Robin Hood Gardens. In his mind, the blocks were already congealed to his story. For him, this book is a document that challenges the narrative told by property developers and politicians of the need for demolition and regeneration. But it is also a powerful reminder of the bureaucratic processes that have brought Robin Hood Gardens to its knees.



10.11.15, 10.11.15, 10.11.15

Most readers will be familiar with the history of the Smithsons' only mixed public housing estate and, indeed, its current status – 'at a review of its history was declined, making demolition a moral certainty' – but fewer will know the impact the regeneration is having on its residents. Known as concrete monoliths or masterpieces by critics and supporters respectively, the buildings – and their apparent architectural (and even) social failures – are debated and argued over, but the residents' feelings are often either ignored or misrepresented.

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I always hoped the council would get the estate painted white and that they would stop the people there. It's better, it's better to the moral that block, which they see as a delinquency among other properties.

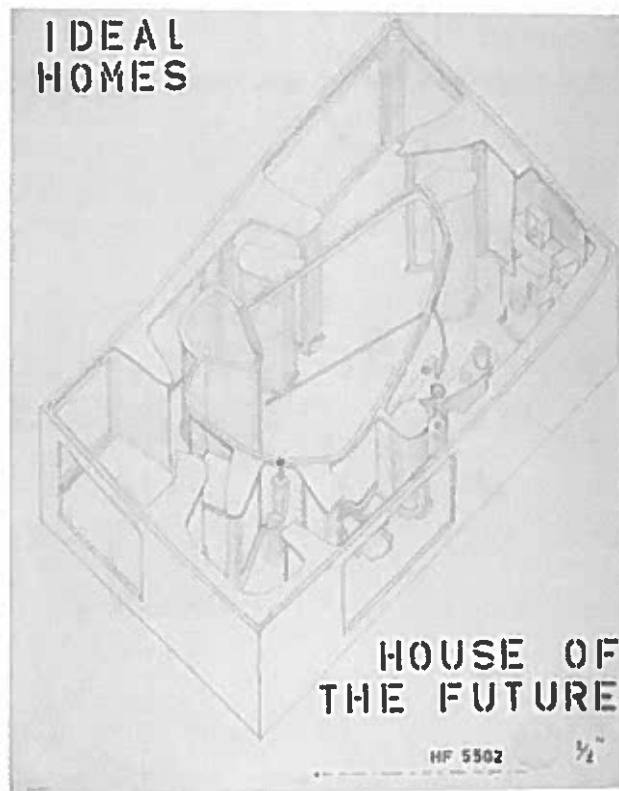
Purchased for V&A from Jessie Brennan, artist:

4 drawings 'A Fall of Ordinairiness and Light' 2014 (one shown above)

- a series shown the collapse of Robin Hood Gardens

3 drawings 'Conversation Pieces' 2014-15 (example shown above)

- rubbings of doormats at Robin Hood Gardens



Architectural design, part of a set of drawings in the V&A collections, for the House of the Future, 1956



Photograph of The House of the Future exhibition, 1956. The V&A possesses the Pogo Chair, bottom right



Peter Smithson, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison Smithson & Nigel Henderson
This is Tomorrow exhibition poster, 1956

EXAMPLES of large scale architectural installations in the Museum



