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# Postwar British Fictions of Inhabitation

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December 2020

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

## Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the English Degree Committee.

## Abstract

The New Brutalist architect Alison Smithson is often quoted as saying that ‘a book is like a small building to us’. Indeed, her 1966 novel *A Portrait of the Female Mind as a Young Girl*, published by Chatto and Windus, underscores the fact that the putting-together of both books and buildings was an intensely charged project in the 1950s and 1960s. For Smithson, it was not that there is a mimetic relationship between the two forms. Rather, both house fictions. For Smithson, the writing of books and the planning of buildings was both a way of being in the world and a way of taking it apart and putting it back together. The question of where to dwell, and the search for an ideal location where the self could flourish, underpinned her project. Both of these questions, of course, were shot through with a reflexivity on the historical moment and books and buildings were both products of her postwar ‘making’ as she sought to redefine the meaning of home in a deeply transitional world – and the structures that accommodated it.

The three chapters of this thesis bring literary and filmic texts into dialogue with architectural forms, considering how both are kinds of construction that are contingent on the materials to hand. My first chapter explores some of the tensions I have been outlining here by looking at the Smithsons’ *House of the Future* installation which was displayed at the 1956 *Ideal Home Exhibition*. This immersive structure functioned as a kind of speculative fiction following in a modernist tradition of radical experimentation but was built using new postwar technology and industrially produced materials. This chapter considers this aspirational modernity alongside the scuffed and scratched materials that can be found in the literature and films depicting lodging houses and bedsits in inner city London. I will be looking at the way that these domestic spaces contrast with the promises of the glossy visions of ideal homes on display at the *Ideal Home Exhibition* and in magazines and advertisements. This indexes the ways that the promise of affluence chafed against the lived experience of ‘making do’. This chapter also looks at the ways that this predominantly white making of femininity depended on the othering of Black skin for its articulation. Lynne Reid-Banks’s *The L-Shaped Room* and Roy Ward Baker’s *Flame in the Streets* and Nell Dunn’s *Poor Cow* demonstrate what a more conservative idea of the domestic aimed to preserve.

The second chapter explores the idea of play as a form of inhabitation. Having examined the textures and surfaces of uneven housing provision in inner-city London throughout the 1950s and 1960s, I move from notions of confinement to the possibilities of creative improvisation. I contribute to the discussion surrounding men’s ambivalence towards domestic life – understood as pivoting around the home as a case for a woman – by reading Keith Waterhouse’s *Billy Liar* against the grain. The second half of the chapter looks at positively coded transient forms. Here, I consider Alison Smithson’s essay on the caravan, her affinity with the sheltered space of children’s books and her weekend house ‘*Solar Pavilion*’ as examples of ‘mobile domesticities’.

Chapter 3 examines the self-proclaimed affinity between B.S. Johnson and Alison and Peter Smithson. This chapter thinks about the difficulties of planning and projecting futures, examining the fate of his architect-poet-supply teacher protagonist, Albert Angelo, to illuminate the difficult task of integrating the contingencies of the present with the long-term ‘permanent’. After an extended analysis of the ways that the novel engenders ‘future anxiety’ (both writers and architects have to build into the future, knowing that contingency will almost certainly disprove their predictions), it considers some of the strategies for dealing with this: in particular, the collage approach of the ‘as found’. The fictional architect Albert looks back to literature and the work of architects to try and cobble together inspiration for a postwar arts centre which remains perpetually unbuilt. Instead, the book itself insists on the materiality of its own existence as an object in time and space, calling attention to its architectural structure by framing an empty space in the form of a hole cut through several pages to reveal and disrupt the textual futurity of the narrative.

The conclusion discusses some of the legacies of Brutalism and how it has been turned into concrete relics, obscuring the liveness of this historical moment.



## Acknowledgements

Alison and Peter Smithson saw the history of modern architecture as the history of a conversation between generations. The researching, putting-together and writing of this thesis has been the product of innumerable conversations, and I am grateful to everyone that shared their time with me over the past few years. Thank you to my supervisor, Deborah Bowman, for teaching me to always pay attention to the lino. Your influence on this thesis is obvious on every page. Thanks also to Rod Mengham, Leo Mellor and David Trotter for their enthusiastic reading of early chapter drafts. I cannot thank Lisa Mullen enough for teaching me how to edit with clarity, kindness and patience. It was a privilege to have my examiners, Clair Wills and Gill Plain, whom I admire greatly, read my thesis with such rigour.

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## Introduction: Fictions of Inhabitation

The New Brutalist architect Alison Smithson is often quoted as saying that ‘a book is like a small building to us’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, her 1966 novel *A Portrait of the Female Mind as a Young Girl*, published by Chatto and Windus, underscores the fact that the putting-together of both books and buildings was an intensely charged project in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>2</sup> For Smithson, it was not that there is a mimetic relationship between the two forms. Rather, both house *fictions*. They involve the careful management of potential futures that are contingent on the materials at hand. They are also both forms that one inhabits. *Inhabitation* was a term that preoccupied Smithson. She was interested in working through the difficulty of self-fashioning when the only available spaces are ones that you have to fit yourself into, rather than the space being fitted to you. For Smithson, the writing of books and the planning of buildings was both a way of being in the world and a way of taking it apart and putting it back together. The question of where to *dwell*, and the search for an ideal location where the self could flourish, underpinned her project. Both of these questions, of course, were shot through with a reflexiveness on the historical moment and books and buildings were both products of her postwar ‘making’ as she sought to redefine the meaning of home – and the structures that accommodated it – in a deeply transitional world.

I define the term ‘inhabitation’ in two different but related ways in this thesis. Alison and Peter (her architectural partner and husband) had their own definition that I will contextualise within wider theories. They concentrated on what they called ‘the art of inhabitation’.<sup>3</sup> Put simply, this describes the way in which people use, occupy and appropriate their homes. The Smithsons were engaged in their own project of ‘inhabiting’ a modernist lineage and reinventing it for the postwar world. They inherited a modernist ethos from the previous generation: as they saw it, this process of ‘inhabiting’ the avant-garde came about through an architectural practice that centred collaboration and conversation, modelled on a family tree. In contrast to Le Corbusier, who in many ways set the agenda for modernist inter-war architecture, they wanted to design a house that was not a well-maintained, slick machine, but a space that would actively welcome the ways that its inhabitants wanted to use it. The question of how to appropriate and instrumentals the legacy of high modernism, when its techniques and its concerns were superannuated, will prove an important idea for this thesis. However, a more expansive definition of inhabitation broadens the scope of this work far beyond a particular idiosyncratic milieu or ‘scene’. Rather, my usage follows on from the Smithsons’ belief that

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Smithson quoted in Jonathan Hill, *A Landscape of Architecture, History and Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Smithson *A Portrait of the Female Mind as a Young Girl* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson, *Changing The Art of Inhabitation* (London: Ellipsis, 1994).

the ordinary should be the starting point for the reinvigoration of a built environment that had been transformed during the Second World War.

My phrase ‘fictions of inhabitation’ refers to a rich seam of texts that, in their representations of the domestic, register the instabilities of reconstructing everyday life. It takes into account the multitude of ways that writers, film-makers, architects, planners, artists and so on were engaged in the questions of how people should live and how they should behave at a time when modes of representation had been shaken as both narrative potential and material structures had been destabilised. Fiction is particularly adept at capturing the contours and textures of everyday life as it something that is constantly being made and remade. It is a place where governing social and political institutions meet the routines and rhythms of daily life; a site where cultural norms are experienced as a set of available scripts for individual interpretation. These fictions can be appropriated, resisted, subverted, ‘queered’ through the endless ways that they are adapted for personal ends. Fiction registers the *potential lives* that can be imagined at a historical moment while underscoring the unevenness of, and asymmetries in, how domestic life is experienced. By bringing representations of aspirational domestic settings into dialogue with the banal, this thesis builds a back-to-back collage that aims to show how discourses of newness saturated the old. As Marina MacKay and Lindsay Stonebridge have emphasised, the task of the mid-century novel was to imagine the future while dealing with the impressive weight of the past.<sup>4</sup> The domestic is the perfect place to understand how different people used what they had to hand to *inhabit* ‘the future’ as hopes and dreams met material realities. As society progressed out of austerity and into supposed affluence, the *kinds* of materials that defined inhabitation and made their way into fiction changed too.

### **‘Is your home just what you’d build?’**

It is first valuable to give a brief overview of how the Smithsons’ architectural practice fits into the broader policy of the welfare state. The clearest place to gain an understanding of their overall project is their collection of essays *Ordinariness and Light* which was published in 1970. They describe this collection as ‘a tumultuous rag-bag of text, naive, embarrassingly rhetorical, but stuffed with good things.’<sup>5</sup> This is a good description of the book. In the preface, they write how: ‘Due to the world shortage of steel [in 1952-1953], there was a pause in general building activity. This pause seemed the

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<sup>4</sup> Lindsay Stonebridge and Marina MacKay, *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson, *Ordinariness and Light: Urban theories 1952-1960 and their application in a building project 1963-1970* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 11.

right moment to try to set out as clearly as we could a basis for a new beginning.’<sup>6</sup> It is worth quoting the following passage from the preface at length because it describes their distinct point of view and some of the problems that animated their work throughout the 1950s and 1960s:

Up to that time, the actual achievements of architecture and town re-building in England had been so feeble that for the ordinary person to feel that any attempt to build the dreamed-of post-war world was being made. In the comprehensive redevelopment areas in London – Lansbury, Poplar for example – it was the same dreary old piecemeal tinkering of between the wars. Somehow a defeated world – and this was not the result of practical restrictions, it was a true bankruptcy of sustaining notions.

The ‘New Towns’ – by then several hundred thousand houses on the ground – were routine places, built to a common pattern. Not a single experimental housing area had been established, and no architect of our generation was given even six houses to do.

What could the authorities possibly have lost?

The extraordinary thing is that sixteen years later the situation has not really changed. Those same, now no-longer-young, men and women who studied with such dedication Le Corbusier’s great housing experiment at Marseilles during its years of building between 1947-1953, still have not been allowed to attack the one problem that was central to their interest in their most formative period – that of housing.

For us personally the pause in building lasted from 1954 to 1962. Re-reading this text now is both poignant and painful, for the sense of faith and of energy just waiting to be released can still be felt.<sup>7</sup>

In the first chapter, the Smithsons open by setting out their problem:

The task of our generation is plain –  
we must re-identify man with his house,  
his community,  
his city.<sup>8</sup>

They then begin with a quote from the architect of the welfare state, Aneurin Bevan: ‘The Great Society has arrived and the task of our generation is to bring it under control.’ It is worth noting that the Smithsons begin with this quote from *In Place of Fear*, which was published in 1952, because it sets their work within this wider context. The primary goal of the welfare state can be described as a commitment to policy that established benevolent, good quality state services. This was strongly reflected in Bevan’s commitment to building high quality housing with high minimum standards, rather focusing on quantity: ‘we must not only build quickly, we must build well. In the next year or so, we will be judged by the number of houses we have put up. But in ten years we will be judged by the quality of those homes’.<sup>9</sup> For Bevan, council housing meant more than just bricks and mortar, it should be the built representation of a new ethos for a fairer Britain. He was unapologetic in his belief that the working classes should live in quality housing and that it should not be reserved for the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Brian Lund, *Understanding Housing Policy* (Policy Press: Bristol, 2017), p. 109.

middle classes. He considered that the Conservatives were disinterested because they would not be inhabiting these houses themselves: something that is reflected in the shift away from quality to quantity when Harold Macmillan's government was elected in 1951. In 1952, Macmillan published a pamphlet called *Houses*, where he wrote that in practice there would be reductions on space by 100 square feet minimum.<sup>10</sup> What this meant was less storage space as cupboards were omitted from bedrooms, kitchens were smaller, and entrance halls were reduced to a lobby where there would be no room for coats of prams. As David Kynaston puts it, this gave a good indication of the consequences of the building of these so-called 'People's Homes'.<sup>11</sup> As Brian Lund notes, the Conservatives built more public houses between 1951 and 1954 than Labour had.<sup>12</sup> Massive scale building remained on the agenda from the 1950s to the early 1970s. In 1955 the Conservative government laid out plans to build 350,000 new homes and indicated that they would continue building at this rate. The ideological shift that is represented here provides useful context for the Smithsons' attitude to public building. Indeed, the virtually instant contraction of what the state was offering applied to other facets of Bevan's welfare state, such as the nationalisation of health services and insurance. Kynaston argues that it is important to note that neither the public nor private sector offered democratic control, and in fact, if you were part of the minority that could afford it, the latter offered more choice. Kynaston points out that although the ideas of the welfare state were ambitious and innovative, 'too many non-believers were appointed to nationalised boards, including not just businessmen but a motley crew of businessmen and retired generals... the criticism, though, that would resonate most through the years, at least from the left, was that a golden opportunity had been missed to institute a meaningful form of workers' control'.<sup>13</sup>

This is a useful overview for contextualising the Smithsons' complicated relationship with welfare state policy, which I would summarise most clearly like so: the Smithsons agreed with the principle that ordinary people deserved to live in good quality homes, which was a core belief of Bevan's. However, the rapid project of state-controlled building that ensued, where 'totals were displayed in the [Housing] department along the lines of a cricket scoreboard', was consistently at odds with their ethics.<sup>14</sup>

This is emphasised by the sense of hope that we can see in their laying out of 'The Problem' when they write that 'We, more than any other people in the world today, have the administrative-economic

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Lund, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Kynaston, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> See Lund, p. 109.

set-up to make possible the large scale re-building of our cities; even in America, that wonder-land of anything possible, there is no programme of new towns.’<sup>15</sup> Yet they were also suspicious that the New Town building programs were what people wanted either as they carry on with the indictment that, ‘We have so far missed a great opportunity because no one any longer has a clear idea.’:

Is your home just what you’d build?

The argument that suburbs are what everyone wants is invalid. We are not a medieval community that actually directs its individual house to its taste. Folk-build is dead in England. [...]

In the 1920’s geometric pattern was to be the salvation of our cities. But applied pattern is a mere substitute for thinking: cities must remain organisms that each age can make its own while it inhabits them. Ordered but not geometric. Behind the geometric facades our washing, our china dogs and aspidistras look out of place. Life in action cannot be forced behind the netting of imposed pattern.<sup>16</sup>

The criticism that they are already making is that the planners at the moment want to patch cities up but, ‘what use is the planner unless he makes order out of disarray and form out of the sea of building?’ The architect or planner will, they argue, be fortunate if he can add one ‘genuine thing to a city’.<sup>17</sup> They imagine the city is a living organism, one that architects and planners ‘feed’ new things to. The city will ‘renew and re-orientate itself accordingly; the process cannot be artificial or fake.’ Indeed, in their view, ‘splendid parks and museums’ only make apparent through contrast the ‘hopeless muddle around the home’.<sup>18</sup>

Thus I interpret this as the Smithsons feeling that Bevan does not go far enough with his overall vision: ‘the approach to a house is the occupants’ link with society as a whole – a lengthy climb up a rickety stair or down into a basement; up an avenue; up an estate road; along an air-conditioned artificially lit corridor’.<sup>19</sup> Thus they are interested in how the individual moves through the world: ‘these are man’s links with society, the vistas down which he looks at his world; they frame his perspective view. This is what really matters and not minimum room area, heights etc., etc., for any interior can be made a home, any place decorated or altered.’<sup>20</sup>

However, the extent to which they were wedded to this last clause is debatable, as Smithson’s novel suggests that this claim that ‘any interior can be made a home’ does not hold up, from the furnishing of the ‘interior space’ of the self to her physical environment.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ordinariness and Light*, p. 18

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

## Reconstruction Fiction in Experimental Mode

The 1966 publication date of Smithson's *Young Girl* might lead one to believe that the novel belongs to a moment of material plenty: a burgeoning spectacular consumer culture that promised more choice. But Smithson began compiling the manuscripts for the book in 1953 during a protracted period of not-building, out of frustration at the stalled work on a private commission, Burrows Lea Farm in Shere, Surrey, and continued to rework them into the sixties. The span of the time frame tracks a vast shift in cultural attitudes. For this reason, it is not simply a 'period piece' providing an insight into reconstruction but rather registers a transition that I will (broadly) characterise as a move from 'making do' to selecting and choosing for yourself. The novel sets up a number of concerns that will prove central to this thesis. As I will demonstrate, the book conveys the sense of being constrained by the material scarcity of postwar Britain in the 1950s (while being able, in peacetime, to be able to plan) and the overwhelmingness of trying to build a life when surrounded by the 'stuff' of the past. But it also simultaneously engages with a future where the 'making' of the self would be shaped by emerging new forces.

Before we analyse the beginning of this period, it is valuable to consider what came just before, given that this was a period in which architects and writers were seeking to navigate a landscape that was a constant reminder of the recent violent past, while at the same time seeking to imagine and indeed realise a better future. The postscript to Elizabeth Bowen's collection of short stories written during the war, *The Demon Lover* (1945), draws attention to some of the challenges that the individual self would face up to now it had ceased. During the war:

Self-expression in small ways stopped – the small ways had been so very small that we had not realised how much they amounted to. Planning fun, going places, choosing and buying things, dressing yourself up, and so on. All that stopped. You used to know what you were like from the things that you liked, and chose. Now there was not what you liked, and you did not choose. Any little remaining choices and pleasures shot into new proportion and new value. People paid big money for little bunches of flowers.<sup>21</sup>

Bowen describes these stories as 'between-time stories', 'byproducts of the non-impulsive major routine of war', and 'reactions from, or intermissions between, major events.'<sup>22</sup> Maximum contingency and total war rendered life impossible to plan: 'There was an element of chanciness and savageness about everything – even, the arrival at a country house for Christmas' and there was 'the

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Demon Lover* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945), p. 220.

<sup>22</sup> Bowen, p. 222.

claustrophobia of not being able to move about freely and without having to give account of yourself.’<sup>23</sup> As Bowen puts it, ‘outwardly, we accepted that at this time individual destiny had to count for nothing. Inwardly, individual destiny became an obsession in every heart. You cannot personalise persons. Every writer at this time was aware of the personal cry of the individual.’<sup>24</sup> Bowen goes on to describe how, after the damage of the Blitz, people:

assembled bits of themselves – broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps from the curtains they had hung in a room—from the wreckage. In the same way, they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems, from their memories, from one another’s talk.<sup>25</sup>

After the War, in novels such as Elizabeth Berridge’s *Be Clean, Be Tidy* (1949) (describing a ‘hateful’ period spent working for the Bank of England during which its offices were relocated to barracks in the countryside, with its employees residing in dormitories) and Elizabeth Taylor’s *At Mrs Lippincote’s* (1945) assessed the relationship between the individual and the community after this period of putting aside their individual needs for the good of others.<sup>26</sup> In Taylor’s *At Mrs Lippincote’s*, a middle-class family have been billeted to Mrs Lippincote’s Victorian home. They are unable to make a proper home there because Mrs Lippincote’s things take up so much of the storage space. Shared spaces impinge on personal development as there is no room for inhabitation. Julia ‘went to the bureau and opened the drawers one after another. All full: knitting-needles, playing-cards, paper-patterns, photographs..., some black-edged visiting cards and letters... She felt burdened by Mrs. Lippincote’s possessions. ‘We shall never make a home of this,’ she cried.’<sup>27</sup> Inhabitation is painful and difficult because they are crowded out by too much *stuff*.

As Paula Derdiger writes, postwar realist fiction set in billets and boarding houses was a way to assess the government’s plans for the future.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Derdiger’s work argues that realism was an important mode of what she terms ‘reconstruction fiction’, mediating between the self and its environment. Her term ‘reconstruction fiction’ is one that is valuable to this thesis, although I will be using my term ‘fictions of inhabitation’. This is because of the active critical conversation in mid-century scholarship as to the ways that ‘realist fiction’ interacts with ‘experimental fiction’. This is a knotty debate that requires unpacking. Derdiger argues that wartime and postwar writers were in prime position to capture the unique significance of the domestic in this specific moment. She shows how living space

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Berridge, *Be Clean Be Tidy* (London: Persephone Books, 1949); Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote’s* (London: Virago, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>28</sup> Paula Derdiger, *Reconstruction Fiction: Housing and Realist Literature in Postwar Britain* (Ohio: Ohio State Press, 2020), p. 55.

was subject to dramatic transformation and repurposing, and a secure relationship between individuals, their communities and their homes was profoundly disturbed. Her aim is to demonstrate how although many people were rehoused in new buildings, literature provides an alternative record representing the many others who had to make their lives in the left-behind housing that most probably needed full reconstruction, but that were instead repurposed and modified: such as in the dilapidated Victorian terraced houses that were carved up into flats and bedsits. ‘Reconstruction’, as the central term of her book, ‘acknowledges both the sociopolitical primacy of reconstruction efforts as well as the problems inherent in executing idealistic reconstruction plans, including, in some cases, the failure to do so at all.’<sup>29</sup> Works of ‘reconstruction fiction’ clarify and mediate the challenges that reconstruction faced in its multiple permutations’.<sup>30</sup> For Derdiger, it is realism in particular that excels in this task, making the important claim that it was far from being a conservative retreat and was a radical mode of engagement with the exterior world, investing in social and material conditions just as much – or if not more – than characters’ interior lives.

My term ‘fictions of inhabitation’ shares Derdiger’s thesis that reconstruction did not only call for ‘bricks and mortar, architectural drawings, town plans, and new policies, but for fiction that invited particular ways of inhabiting an environment that had been irrevocably changed.’<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, ‘reconstruction fiction’ is particularly adept at capturing, in the dissonances and fissures, the contrasts between the future as imagined in the overtly utopian rhetoric of plans such as the Bridge Report and planning documents characterised by resilience, and the often squalid living conditions that people found them in. Indeed, where Derdiger provides a thorough and insightful account of planning debates and governmental policy, I apply this same idea to a wider range of ‘non-fictional documents’ such as advertisements and magazines. Where I deviate, however, is that the questions that Derdiger is asking of realism are only part of the story in this project. If Derdiger is considering ‘reconstruction fiction’ in realist mode, I am looking at it in *experimental* mode. This also bears explaining because of ways ‘experiment’ is discussed in relation to mid-century fiction, particularly in relation to modernism. Broadly speaking, my emphasis is on the ‘putting-together’ of forms and the picking and choosing of ‘materials’, which cuts across different genres which are often pitted against each other. For the purposes of Derdiger’s specific project, she argues that ‘reconstruction fiction’ is particularly productive because it facilitates the scholarly conversation moving away from its preoccupation with modernism. She follows Gill Plain who argued of the 1940s that, ‘There is no doubt that many [wartime and postwar] writers continued to be influenced by a modernist aesthetic,’ but in scholarly

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

terms, ‘modernism’ is a distraction for the 1940s, and its deployment risks obliterating the very diverse voices and literary developments of the period. The Second World War really does change everything’.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, modernism can be a distraction, and leaving that particular can of worms sealed allows Derdiger to recuperate realism’s misaligned reputation. However, my project brings modernism back into play and, in particular, how modernism relates to the history of women and experiment.

The recent collection edited by Andrew Radford and Hannah Van Hove, *British Experimental Women’s Fiction 1945-1975* demonstrates the slipperiness of this ‘vexed’ and ‘vexing’ category.<sup>33</sup> The book scrutinises a range of overlooked post World War II women writers who demonstrated that narrative prose offered many opportunities for innovation. Their argument is the obverse of Derdiger’s: in their view, each author challenges the tenets of British mimetic realism as a literary and historical phenomenon. They investigate whether women’s procedures and perspectives were politically different from their male counterparts. They shed light on authors who sought to break, in the words of Christine Brooke-Rose, ‘one of the last fundamental taboos: the ‘deep seated notion, which you can trace all the way back to Plato, against the idea that women can actually create new forms.’<sup>34</sup> Deborah Philips and Kate Aughterson also explicate how the gendering of experiment stretches back to the inception of the novel, arguing that the ‘experiment’ is a deeply political response to alterity that stretches back over 400 years. Similarly, *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* defines ‘experimental literature’ as so:

All literary experiments share... their commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself. What is literature, and what could it be? What are its functions, its limitations, its possibilities? These are the sorts of questions that “mainstream” literature, at all periods – commercial bestseller literature, but also the “classics” once they have been canonised, domesticated and rendered first for unreflective consumption is dedicated to repressing. Experimental literature unrepressed these fundamental questions, and in doing so it lays everything open to challenge, reconceptualisation and reconfiguration. Experimentation makes alternatives visible and conceivable, and some of these new alternatives become the foundations for future developments, whole new ways of writing, some of which eventually filter into the mainstream itself. Experiment is one of the engines of literary change and renewal; it is literature’s way of reinventing itself.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Gill Plain, *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and ‘Peace’* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> *British Experimental Women’s Fiction 1945-1975: Slipping Through the Labels*, Andrew Radford and Hannah Van Hove (eds), (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> *Women Writers and Experimental Narratives: Early Modern to Contemporary*, Kate Aughterson and Deborah Philips (eds) (Cham: Springer, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

However, this concept of experiment is again too limited for my project because although it is important to reclaim a female avant-garde tradition and a worthwhile project of feminist literary history, this reading perpetuates a dichotomy of literary and political value that identifies formal experimentation as the most authentic form of resistance, thus regaling representational art and forms of mass culture (from the bestseller to the classics). Indeed, against this backdrop, it is clear to understand why Derdiger has to justify realism's value. Yet my project approaches the question from another angle: one that is summarised by Michael Whitworth's 'Regendering Modernisms'.<sup>36</sup> In his view, scholars have worked to pluralise what 'counts' as meaningful history, taking seriously aspects of culture that have been branded 'retrogressive' rather than 'authentically modern'.<sup>37</sup> These include: romantic love, consumerism, motherhood, fashion and, indeed, popular fiction. As Martin Pumphrey puts it, 'Any adequate reading of the modern period... must take account of the fact that the debates over women's public freedom, over fashion and femininity, cosmetics and house-cleaning were as essential to the fabrication of modernity as cubism, Dada or futurism, as symbolism, fragmented form or the stream-of-consciousness narrative.'<sup>38</sup> This is the 'modernity of department stores and factories, of popular romances and women's magazines, of mass political movements and bureaucratic constructions of femininity. These concerns are not absent from modernism but they are often mediated through a lens of irony, defamiliarisation and montage specific to an artist and intellectual – if not necessarily political – elite of the period.' The definition between high and low is elucidated in another context by Andreas Huyssen's work on women and mass culture as modernism's Other: something that applies to both architectural and literary forms.<sup>39</sup> Although, as I will go on to discuss, the postwar period eschewed the distinctions between the 'brows', it is worth keeping in mind that it is via these forms of media that we can learn about the forces of modernity that shaped the lives of different kinds of women's lives and, also, the uneven distribution of this modernity.

Indeed, accounts of postwar modernism take into account print culture and canon formation but argue that it is a capacious and splintered object. For instance, both Clair Wills' and J. Dillon Brown's work on migrant literary cultures in postwar London are engaged in the networks and affiliations that were established.<sup>40</sup> The modernism of George Lamming, Sam Selvon, and V.S. Naipaul, for example,

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<sup>36</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, 'Regendering Modernism', *Modernisms* (Oxford: Wiley, 2007), pp. 216-243.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Andreas Huyssen, 'Mass Culture as Woman', printed in *Modernisms*, pp. 144-159.

<sup>40</sup> Clair Wills, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-war Britain* (London: Penguin, 2017); J. Dillon Brown, *Migrant Modernism: Postwar London and the West Indian Novel* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

is contextualised as an aesthetic response to the sense of the migrant self as transient, finding expression in transient lodgings and improvised living spaces and they both give a sense of the radio and magazine culture that these authors published in: ‘post-war experimental fiction emerged through migrancy, hybrids, assimilations, circulation, Sunday markets and eye-catching promotional “puffs”.’<sup>41</sup> Remembering that ‘modernisms’ are subject to the forces of the market and production is important to hold in mind. Furthermore, Nicola Humble’s work on the middlebrow novel makes the point that campy inventions can unsettle normative forms, with tongue in cheek.<sup>42</sup> In addition to this, Humble argues that the middlebrow ‘cannot ultimately be distinguished from the avant-garde highbrow on a formal basis: some highly popular works were formally experimental; some extremely abstruse novels had a cultish mode of production.’<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Smithson’s *Young Girl* is one such slippery novel, bringing together romance plots with James Joyce’s work and building the novel around the girl’s teenage fantasies; written by an ‘avant-garde’ architect and published to little acclaim. Similarly, the novels and films I will go on to analyse cut across different genres: from Carry On films, to ‘social problem’ films, children’s books, realist fiction and non-fictional essays. Indeed, this thesis works on surprising juxtapositions, hoping to uncover a ‘structure of feeling’ and shed light on this live and diverse period of literary and cultural history. To this end, I will be bringing modernism(s) into dialogue with realism(s) and unifying them under the term ‘fictions of inhabitation’.

In addition to the ways that Derdiger is deploying ‘reconstruction fiction’, the other definition of realism that informs my choice of texts is the realism described by Rod Mengham in ‘Bad Teeth’.<sup>44</sup> Here Mengham argues that ‘the realism that observed the socialist years of the late 1940s was also in place for the dramatic social changes of the conservative 1950s, with their redistribution of employment opportunities and expansion of consumer choice.’<sup>45</sup> He writes how the socialist realist novels of the late 1950s and early 1960s documented new kinds of alienation that resulted from growing income inequality and the effects of mass culture on regional, class and gender identities. In his reading, the so-called meritocratic eclipse of class privileged figured as a ‘spectacular reassertion of class structure’ to the majority who would not benefit from it.<sup>46</sup> Social realism was an account of what was still owed to those whose needs were ‘not comprehended by the materialistic criteria of never

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<sup>41</sup> Radford and Van Hove, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Nicola Humble, ‘The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow’, *Sheffield Hallam University: Working Papers on the Web*. <<https://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/Humble.html>>.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>44</sup> Mengham, Road, ‘Bad Teeth: British Social Realism in Fiction’ in David Tucker (ed.) *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

having had it so good.’<sup>47</sup> These novels ‘monitor the stress-lines of British social malaise that join up with the confusingly intersecting patterns of historical memory, economic policy, mass culture and public morality in a ferocious critique of the condition of Britain.’<sup>48</sup> Again, the *questions* of what was promised by the future and what it delivered are crucial to this project. However, I hope to challenge some of the gendered values of ‘authenticity’ prevalent in these novels. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Carolyn Steedman looks back on her days at the University of Sussex in 1965.<sup>49</sup> She remarked on how difference her experience had been from, for example, Jeremy Seabrook and Richard Hoggart who had been at Cambridge in the 1950s, talking with their peers, ‘telling each other escape stories in which we were all picaresque heroes of our own lives.’<sup>50</sup> Steedman writes how there were no other women to talk to like this: ‘and should I have met a woman like me (there must have been some: we were all children of the Robbins generation), we couldn’t have talked of escape except within a literary framework that we had learned from the working-class novels of the early sixties (some of which, like *Room at the Top*, were set books on certain courses); and that framework was itself ignorant of the material stepping-stones of our escape.’<sup>51</sup> As Steedman looks back on her life, and the life of her mother, she uses fiction to try and write a book about stories and things (objects, entities, relationships, people) and the way people talk and write about them.’<sup>52</sup> Above all, she writes, ‘it is about people wanting those things, and the structures of political thought that have labelled this wanting as wrong.’<sup>53</sup> This thesis pays attention to the different textures of women’s lives. For Steedman, this is the power of clothes. She describes how, in 1950, she made her first attempt to understand and symbolise the content of her mother’s desire. For Steedman, moving through the world, clothes had the usefulness of the psychological attachment that babies have to their battered teddies and scraps of blanket that they use to distinguish themselves from the world. They seem to ‘give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own. Like clothes: that we may see ourself better as we stand there and watch; and for our protection.’<sup>54</sup> For this project, my focus is the textures of domestic spaces as another kind of transient ‘furnishing’ of the self. These are the kinds of materials that are often presented as a foil to male narratives of escape.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>49</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986)

<sup>50</sup> Jeremy Seabrook, *Working Class Childhood* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1982), p. 262.

<sup>51</sup> Steedman, pp. 15-16.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Carolyn Steedman, ‘Death of a Good Woman’, Maud Blair, Janet Holland and Sue Shelden (eds). *Identity and Diversity: Gender and the Experience of Education: A Reader* (Multilingual Matters: Clevedon, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

*A Portrait of the Female Mind as a Young Girl* provides a starting place for demonstrating how I will be handling this diverse range of material. Smithson's novel animates a set of aesthetic questions that probe the viability of modernist experiment as it meets everyday postwar life. For Smithson's protagonist, a fifteen year old girl growing up in a provincial town in postwar England, the difficulties of inhabitation are bound up with a painful and awkward inheritance of high modernism as it chafes against the textures of her everyday life: she wants newness. It opens with the girl lying unhappily in bed, attempting to soothe herself with an episode of daydreaming: 'Her mind mumbled its comforts and the girl in the bed blew her nose on the wet ball of handkerchief and settled down to think herself a story.'<sup>55</sup> She is both constructing a narrative and describing the building of herself, thinking herself *into* a story – a *bildungsroman*. Yet despite her repetitive attempts to scan 'the inside of her head with what felt like the hot backs of her eyes to find a setting' she struggles to find a 'scene that gave her an entrance.'<sup>56</sup> The stories that she tells are resistant to inhabitation, made worse by her feeling that she is being stifled by her parents' furniture and the worn-out 'soppy, dirty bricks and soot shadows' of the 1930s suburbia where she lives:

«I don't hold it against objects, furniture, town, but against those that make them. They are not pressing me, but their things, but their things are. I'm sure they never think of it as bonking people all the time when they manufacture ugly things.»<sup>57</sup>

In its radical approach to interiority and consciousness, Smithson's project was taking up the baton of modernist experiment, but the girl finds its techniques and strategies do not have the same effect on her environment:

The bricks and what they made might have offended someone like her originally. A girl, staring out of a window, when houses were first built over the fields. Maybe in those days they were even more helpless at making order for their own balance of mind. Modern art and literature was really very good at remaking one's own image this sort of situation. «But what is my own image? She pivoted her head and glanced back at the room. Was that her squinched in the mirror? Parents' furniture. «What could one do with it? Paint it like the magazines said?» She considered the work involved. The walls, the floor. «The beds would still look wrong. No, things are all the wrong shapes. They keep demanding these trains of thought that would alter them, make them young again. Make those desirable that had never been young.»<sup>58</sup>

She struggles to repurpose the form for the needs of the present: it is an awkward fit. Furthermore, she desires a form that does not require energy from her:

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<sup>55</sup> *Young Girl*, p. 9

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>58</sup> Smithson, p. 93.

It was not her—they were tired. Of their lives, tired because of the town. Sapped by giving out energy to the look of the place, the sites left from the depression, the buildings since the '30s, the suburbs. You had to give all the time to give them life.<sup>59</sup>

Smithson comments on her sense that this interpretation of modernism is no longer sufficient or useful as a way of reconciling the self with the modern world. 'Modernism' is asynchronous with the modern and, as Ashley Maher astutely demonstrates, there was no longer optimistic compatibility between literary and architectural modernism.<sup>60</sup> Modernism might have remade one's context in one's image: consciousness imbuing itself in interiors. Yet the girl's consciousness does not seem to have this effect. The furniture she inherits is stiflingly resistant to alteration—it is impossible to change around; things have already been adapted and are thick with inhabitation: 'all this furniture, everything is theirs. If only there was a little or nothing then maybe one would not feel so weighed down.'<sup>61</sup> She finds herself crowded out: if she cannot reflect her self in her environment, will she be contained in the frame of the mirror, her reflection 'squinted' down — or should she smash up the mirror and remake the world itself?

### Reinventing the Modernist Shell

The passage quoted above frames the question of how useful modernism would be in the 1950s and 1960s. MacKay writes that:

The terms on which mid-century fiction has been (and often still is) read were established by those modernist writers who, in their iconoclastic polemics about the function of fiction, attacked their immediate predecessors for having 'referential and discursive' ambitions of a kind that made the highest artistic achievements impossible; famously, 'realist' became synonymous with crudity and anachronism.<sup>62</sup>

This point of view is summed up nicely by Bernard Bergonzi's argument in 1970 that the post-war novelist inherited a form whose principle characteristic is novelty, or stylistic dynamism, and yet nearly everything possible to be achieved has already been done.<sup>63</sup> As MacKay and Stonebridge comment, 'the fact that Britain spent most of the post-war period staggering from one economic crisis to another gives this industrial model of fiction-making—whereby modernism has depleted a finite stock of resources—a certain historical pathos.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>60</sup> Ashley Maher, *Reconstructing Modernism: British Literature, Modern Architecture, and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>62</sup> MacKay and Stonebridge, p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

This is the question that frames the text and speaks to the literary historical moment: how do you ‘make it new’ when you are restricted by the debris of the past?<sup>65</sup> The patchwork composition of Smithson’s novel gives us some clues. Although it is marked by the stylistic flourishes of a modernist work of collage, the effect is that it appears overcrowded and restless. Alongside conventional punctuation, there appear less familiar, angled markings: French «guillemets» that joltingly signify a rupture of shift in subjectivity, her own thoughts made foreign to herself. This cramped textual surface accumulates an excess of voices and voicings. These swell inside the already-inhabited pastiche of the modernist form: a definition of pastiche that resonates less with Frederic Jameson’s idea that it is the empty commodification of form but rather Gerard Genette’s. Genette aligns Lévi-Strauss’ strategy of ‘bricolage’ with pastiche, defining it as ‘the making of something new out of something old.’<sup>66</sup> Genette’s bricoleur works with the heterogeneous and distinct materials and forms that they have at hand, producing, through a process of tweaking and tinkering, unforeseen results. It is positively coded: a palimpsestic text that overwrites the initial inscription but retains the trace of the original. It is a way of passing things on, inhabiting a tradition. But despite so conspicuously re-purposing James Joyce, making something new from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1918) what we experience as a reader is *friction*: a novel with its bursting seams «» on display:

Men write poems about such towns. And novels. People still imitate that although it’s been done.» She did not want to do what had been invented. «Once you’ve heard about it it’s already way past.

I must seek,» she thought, «For something people have not seen, not thought of or anything. Otherwise I contribute nothing.»<sup>67</sup>

There is at once too much stuff and too little. And this, even though it seems to strike out in reaction to the efficacy of the project of modernism, is why the novel fits seamlessly into the world of postwar collage and the difficulty of inhabiting it.

The novel is a catalogue of shabby furniture that rejects the possibilities of putting any further layers on top. Smithson’s protagonist finds these textures, applied to the surface, painful and embarrassing. For example, the girl despises her wallpaper, which has been painted ‘like petrified sick, the treacle-varnished furniture, and the cream curtains with leaves picked out in satin weave.’<sup>68</sup> Her repulsion is figured in terms of a sticky, gloopy, viscous finish: ‘she had discovered the stickiness of everything inside people’s houses’, noticing that ‘the upholstery was slicked with soot. The carpets gummy with

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<sup>65</sup> Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1935).

<sup>66</sup> Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> Smithson, p. 93; James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1918).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

it. In some houses the chairs stank in the fire-heat. The whole lot should be chucked away.’<sup>69</sup> There is no desire to scrape away the sedimented layers of time, rather the ‘whole lot’ should be abandoned: paintedness now appears as disgusting as soot. Her self-soothing daydreams are figured in terms of a ‘balm’ that should be applied to the surface, in order to make it bearable:

She depended on them so much that she got through a lot, she was up til three or one in the morning regularly: repetitive, balm, necessary since the mental flagellation was repetitive.<sup>70</sup>

This attention to surface, at both a formal level and the furnishing of the domestic space, here, are related. In Smithson’s account, the girl’s surroundings are as far away from the ‘ideal’ Modern interior as you could find. The model of interiority/exteriority that Smithson adapts finds its best expression in relation to Walter Benjamin’s writing on the interior. It encapsulates what the Smithsons’ predecessors were trying to achieve. Benjamin argues that the cosy and plush nineteenth century bourgeois interior was not suited to the patterns of twentieth century society. In the nineteenth century, bourgeois interiors encased the inhabitant in a fixed shell that would be filled with carefully chosen objects:

The original form of all dwelling is existence not in a house but in a shell. The shell bears the impression of its occupant. In the most extreme instance, the dwelling becomes a shell. The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling’s interior, that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet.<sup>71</sup>

His concern was that as a repository of commodified goods that have been bestowed with sentimental value and memories, the inhabitant is inhibited from changing. Domestic space becomes stuffed with emblems of capitalist consumption. Its plushiness registers the traces of living, offering a secluded retreat from the shocks of the public sphere. Yet this, in his view, was redundant in the modernist era. Dwelling should no longer be recorded in ineradicable imprints: in the collection of traces. Interiors should not coerce the inhabitant to conform to a logic that they establish: ideally, they should be changeable and flexible. The boundaries between interior and exterior surfaces need not be so rigid. A house need not take the form of a sealed container that stops its contents from spilling out or becoming contaminated, like a tomb or a can of soup. Instead, it becomes a kind of conduit for transitory new forms of media – in his time, electricity or radio waves.

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30

<sup>71</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 220.

Instead of providing shelter from external stimuli, this adaptable interior would be able to reflect the transitoriness of the modern self. This was one of the key strands that runs through the work of the Modern Movement, as architects such as Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos invert the relationship between privacy and publicity : concealment and display.<sup>72</sup> Modern architecture *was* a form of media. Instead of sheltering the self, media projects interiority outwards. Alice Friedman shows that avant-garde architects often worked with women clients as they were aligned in their desires to renegotiate gendered space.<sup>73</sup> However, there was a tension between the hopes of the Modern Movement and domestic trends. The demands for standardisation, uniformity and economies of scale for mass housing chafed against increased diversification and differentiation of products and a greater consumer choice. How people wanted to *inhabit* these buildings did not necessarily match their plans. The ‘messiness’ of everyday life was often excluded from representations of modernist buildings as the passing of time was ‘frozen’ out of photographic still lifes. For this reason, modern architecture has been described as the ‘other’ of *lived* domesticity.<sup>74</sup> The so-called feminine aspects of dwelling are perceived as a threat to the purity of the form. This is illustrated well by Jeremy Till’s study of contingency and mess in modern architecture, *Architecture Depends* (2009).<sup>75</sup> Here Till captures this idea by providing an example of a documentary series called ‘Sign of the Times’ made by the photographer Martin Parr and the social commentator Nicholas Barker in 1992, depicting:

A sparse modernist interior. A woman is lamenting that her husband [an architect], will not allow her to have ‘normal’ things such as curtains. When her husband Henry appears, he despairs of the ‘rogue objects’ disturbing his ordered interior. ‘To come home in the evening,’ he says, ‘and to find the kids have carried out their own form of anarchy is just about the last thing I can face.’

The rogue objects are his children’s toys.<sup>76</sup>

This anecdote underscores that ‘home’ is something that is constantly being made and remade and shows how in this model of the home, normal domestic life is at odds with the structure.

This understanding of *dwelling* as a repetitive process is crucial to Benjamin’s reconceptualisation of the interior as a shell that is not fixed but is constantly being refashioned: “To dwell” is a transitive verb - as in the notion of ‘indwelt spaces’; herewith an indication of the frenetic topicality concealed in

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<sup>72</sup> See Beatriz Colomina *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>73</sup> Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History* (London: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>74</sup> Christopher Reed ed., *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

<sup>75</sup> Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

habitual behaviour. It has to do with fashioning a shell for ourselves.’<sup>77</sup> The individual and their ‘container’ should mould and remould to each other. Smithson’s girl, working in this modernist tradition, pins up magazine cuttings:

The girl had kept some pictures of aeroplanes out of magazines. She used to pin things to the bottom edge of the picture rail where the holes did not show. The wood was impossible in some places and simply reverse pinned into her finger with these soft drawing-pins if she was not careful. She got down off the bed and looked at them. They were marvelous photos.<sup>78</sup>

This looks forward to the description of inhabitation as a form of ‘appropriation’ that developed by sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s. ‘Appropriation’ transforms mass produced goods from alienated deposits of congealed labour into accessories of the *self*.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, as Luce Giard’s ‘Doing-Cooking’ reminds us, these invisible labours are often overlooked because they are never finished.<sup>80</sup> She argues that recognising that domestic routines *are* evidence of gender inequalities’ and celebrating ‘women’s inventiveness’ in her work while acknowledging the ‘distinct limits and pressures’ in women’s everyday life.<sup>81</sup>

Indeed, these were tensions that were present in the pre-war consumer culture of the 1930s that were intensified in the 1950s and 1960s as the symbolic meanings of ‘home’ were changing and needed new containers. The drama here, then, is one of a struggle of appropriation. The wall physically rejects the photographs. Crowded out by the traces of other people’s choices, she tries on daydreams like a hermit crab, carrying her ideal ‘shell’ on her back.

These daydreams, it emerges, are not of heroic ‘greatness’ or success, but are of romance and family life: ‘big ring, have a baby, get married’ reverberates throughout the novel. Most of the stories in the book revolve around potential boyfriends and romances, or wondering what Chris, the boy up the road who has escaped the town by working as a racecar driver, is doing. After an extended fantasy episode set in Morocco where the girl pursues an older, French colonel, the girl (who is now an adult) cycles rapidly through interactions with unsatisfactory men who are referred to by their first initial, before renouncing this ‘road’ altogether. For comparison, here is the optimistic and future-facing ending of Joyce’s *Portrait*:

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, p. 221.

<sup>78</sup> *Young Girl*, p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>80</sup> Luce Giard, ‘Doing-cooking’, *The Practice of Everyday Life 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), pp. 149-247.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

Welcome, O life! I go ready to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.<sup>82</sup>

And here is Smithson's equivalent address to the future:

I despair of learning not to rise to provocation, of everyone ever, being always so pleasant. Surely I have worked over and out of my upbringing. Born again in my own image; still I am not satisfied. I am over the hill now. All motion to the present has been towards life. Now straight ahead is the road towards death.<sup>83</sup>

Unlike Joyce's appeal to the 'Old father, old artificer', Smithson evokes the spirit of recalcitrant female self-fashioning. In Smithson's redefinition of inhabitation, she insists that experimentation is not at odds with 'feminine' desires. This marks an important departure from the high architectural modernism of the 1920s and 1930s. Smithson brings together the super-conventional with avant-garde practice to think about designing spaces that might respond to the idiosyncratic desires of the teen girl. Furthermore, she asserts that the couple form and the family unit are collaborative forms that generate creativity. The architectural scholar Beatriz Colomina writes in 'With, or Without You: The Ghosts of Modern Architecture' that often women in architecture are often referred to, if they are credited at all, as working 'with' their male counterpart.<sup>84</sup> For Colomina, this is not only a matter of injustice or inaccuracy but a misunderstanding of the nature of architecture and how it is produced. As she describes, 'with' implies a helper, a secondary source of energy, whereas 'and' implies partnership and equality. What is positive about 'and' is that it feeds on differences, on complexity. 'And' may encourage more nuanced forms of production and discourse.'<sup>85</sup> She argues that the postwar period was an especially rich time for collaborative work. The period 'inaugurated new kind of collaborative practice that has become increasingly difficult to ignore or to subsume within a "heroic" conception of an individual figure.'<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the Smithsons figured centred their equal partnership in their self-presentation, going so far as to sketch a 'family tree' to conceptualise their sense of continuities and inheritances. They imagined the three generations as: Mies, the Eameses, and the Smithsons but it was with the Ray and Charles Eames that they had the closest affinity. They identified with this older couple as models as the Eames' work straddled the Second World War. They took every opportunity to cite their work. As I will go on to explore, the Eameses were working in an American context that cannot be transposed onto the British landscape. The Smithsons treated

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<sup>82</sup> Joyce, p. 272.

<sup>83</sup> *Young Girl*, p. 286.

<sup>84</sup> Beatriz Colomina, 'With or Without You: The Ghosts of Modern Architecture', Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (eds), *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art), pp. 216-231, p. 217.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

their works as magical tokens to energise their own process. For example, they wrote that ‘the Eameses have made it respectable to like pretty things. This seems extraordinary, but in our world, pretty things are equated with social irresponsibility.’<sup>87</sup>

Even as early as 1953, their influence can be seen in the furniture that the Smithsons designed for Burrows Lea Farm – the project that never came to fruition and resulted in the frustrated beginnings of *Young Girl*. The Eames chair was the only piece of furniture that they would put in their own home. Of Burrows Lea Farm, they wrote that ‘With the interior sketches of this project, we realised we had a problem... what was to be put in as furniture? We could not be falling back on the Thonet sold in France and used by Le Corbusier.... As a response to the realisation came the Trundling Turk, a chair which looked as if it might follow its owners from room to room and out onto the beach.’<sup>88</sup> The Trundling Turk was a sofa that moved around ‘like a crab’ but with the precision of billiard balls. Unlike the furniture that crowds the girl’s room, this designed furniture responds to its user: reaching out their hand, putting down a book, looking at something. Enric Miralles observed that the chair moves with ‘the same agility with which, in diagrams on the operations of the small kitchen of the thirties, we saw the housewife move. Economy and wealth of movements. These pieces of furniture are like a jack-in-the-box that, upon being opened describes the economic conditions of life.’<sup>89</sup> The antithesis between the phallic myth of the sole, heroic architect and the collaborative nature of these familial forms will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2. Like the Trundling Turk, Smithson was searching for another mobile and responsive form that was also domestic and leisurely. *Young Girl* also captures the way that being on the move in a car is like authoring your own narrative:

These are freewheeling, dredging, seaweed slinging, kind of stories. Most people repeat, without I think often realising it. Really new thoughts are far apart. You marry, and what happens to all those joys and tears? Now it’s all yours. You’re driving. Thus, she had told herself one long story, over and over until it was perfect: in a honeymoon period.<sup>90</sup>

The reason, therefore, that Smithson stands out as the protagonist of this thesis is not because she was *exceptional* but rather because she made a case that any kind of new modernist experiment would need to take seriously both the banal environments that women found themselves in and their aspirations. This is not a project dedicated to recuperating her often diminished voice or raising her up as a feminist hero. Rather, *Young Girl* is our starting place because it provides a fresh angle on women and modernity as she insisted that women’s ordinary, everyday life should be at the heart of whatever shape and form postwar building would take.

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>89</sup> Enric Miralles, ‘On the Trundling Turk’, *OASE Journal* 51 (1999), pp. 14-17, p. 16.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p. 208.

## Collaged Futures?

Richard Hornsey captures some of the tensions inherent in the reconstruction of postwar everyday life and the importance of the domestic to this. He writes that:

the postwar popularisation of psychoanalytic frameworks had already focused a greater attention on the dangerous consequences of domestic mismanagement. Yet, paradoxically, bourgeois imperatives continued to position the home as the sole domain of legitimate sexual expression, made respectable as a site of moral training only by its privacy and impermeability to the unwarranted public gaze. Within this climate, heightened political importance became attached to another cultural arena: that of interior design.<sup>91</sup>

Exhibitions such as *Britain Can Make It* and *The Festival of Britain* argued that reforming and redefining one's own domestic space was a key way of fashioning postwar citizenship. Individuals would be directed through the decoration of their rooms, laying the groundwork for expert supervision without requiring overbearing intrusion from the state. In this version of planning, the wartime architect aimed to stabilise the city by 'reforming the citizen's structural relationship to the ordinary built environment, inserting them into cyclical routines, a spatialised patchwork of prescribed social practices, and by embedding them within an aesthetic order that necessarily fostered a more profound civic sensibility.'<sup>92</sup> For this to work, there would need to be a layer of bureaucratic governance inserted between the individual and the market. The Council of Industrial Design was one such institution. It aimed to reeducate consumers on their basic tastes, encouraging them to reject seductive shiny surfaces and decoration in favour of more functional manufactured commodities.<sup>93</sup> BBC programmes such as the *Looking at Things* series, which was transmitted as part of the BBC Schools' broadcasts, sought to educate young citizens. An early episode that aired in September 1951 asked school listeners, 'Have you a Seeing Eye?' And explained that:

Designing something means more than just drawing a picture of what it is to look like; it also means thinking about how it is to be made and making sure that it will do its job properly. Not everything you see in the shops has been carefully designed, and the most expensive things are not necessarily the best, nor are the cheapest the worst.

A 'seeing eye' will help you to distinguish good design from bad, to choose wisely when you go shopping and to make the best of what you have already... you can start straight away by looking critically at the things around you — the things you use every day. Look at things in shop windows, though you may not yet be able to buy them.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Hornsey, *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar London* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 32.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>94</sup> Becky E. Conekin, *The Autobiography of a Nation, The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 49.

The Festival was a key opportunity to communicate this. It purported to visitors ‘the story of British contributions to world civilisation through the medium of tangible things’ via sixteen pavilions. These were connected by a network of plazas, precincts and walkways that would be an introduction to the progressive modern architecture, and new models of town planning, pioneered for example in the Abercrombie plan. Via the medium of a Festival, it projected a powerful fiction to be collectively inhabited. Through the experience of space, the visitor would experience this carefully designed future and come away from it oriented towards this way of living.<sup>95</sup>

As William Feaver writes in *A Tonic to the Nation*, ‘braced legs, indoor plants, clear-rinse concrete, lily-of-the-valley splays of light bulbs, aluminium lattices, Cotswold-type walling with picture windows, flying staircases, blond wood, the thorn, the spike, the molecule: all became the Festival style.’<sup>96</sup> As Brian Aldiss wrote, ‘after the rat-infested ruins created by the war, the clarity of the South Bank in ’51 came like a bite of lemon at half-time.’<sup>97</sup> It aimed to offer a ‘pattern-book’ for how to inhabit the landscape: strongly encouraging a template using every persuasive technique available to the designers. One of its key strategies was to present the past and the present as a collage, performing mish-mash: ‘the South Bank had an air of touchdown, the Dome a flying saucer, the Skylon on its zigzag supports ready to be catapulted to the stars’, while downstream at the Battersea Pleasure Gardens, visitors could nostalgically enjoy kitschy attractions such as the miniature Far Tottering and Oyster Creek Railway, Punch and Judy shows, a garish stripy Guinness-sponsored clock, a boating lake, a mural of ‘Moggo the Largest Cat’, and Victorian-style fairground rides.<sup>98</sup> Together, clunky assemblage of scenes, shot through with an intangible binding quality of Britishness, claimed to take the shape of Britain. It made a powerful statement that Britain should rejoice in its muddled, eccentric character – narratives that were backed up by Humphrey Jennings’s Festival film *Family Portrait* and the ‘Lion and Unicorn’ (after George Orwell) pavilion which included an ‘egg roundabout’ and a deflatable bus that could compress when passing under bridges.<sup>99</sup> Robert Hewison reflects that the visual flood of disparate materials meant that ‘for most people it [the Festival] made itself felt in just one or two striking images in a kaleidoscope of exhibits or events.’<sup>100</sup> This deliberate layout promoted the rhetoric that wholeness was no longer aspirational. Textual muddle preserves

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<sup>95</sup> See Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters (eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945-1964* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1999).

<sup>96</sup> William Feaver quoted in Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier, eds. *A Tonic to the Nation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>98</sup> *A Tonic to the Nation* profiles each exhibit in detail.

<sup>99</sup> *Family Portrait* (dir. Humphrey Jennings) 1950; see also Lauren Mellet, Sophie Aymes-Stokes, eds. *In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

<sup>100</sup> Robert Hewison, *In Anger: British Culture in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 55.

eccentricities: Britain could be defined through enumeration.<sup>101</sup> However, these were all part of a narrative strategy that encouraged the public to feel fond of their cultural clutter while investing in an idea of a tasteful, well-designed future. In other words, it *looked* like collage but was actually a carefully controlled enterprise. The visitor should come away with the idea that domesticity is the point zero for fulfilment, while also looking outward to the vista of technocratic process. This is encapsulated by the process of naming the Skylon. It was chosen by a competition won by Mrs Sheppard Fidler, who commented ‘nylon was a great new invention, and the name seemed to fit the mood of the times.’<sup>102</sup>

However, as Hornsey points out, this was already an unstable prospect. He argues that there was already a shadowy figure that threatened to destabilise this cohesive vision. This was the ‘spiv’ who represented anxieties about dissent. He was presented as a ‘gaudy remnant’ of laissez-faire capitalism, ignoring all programs of visual education and exhibiting frivolity by flaunting fashion.<sup>103</sup> Not only this, but he would corrode the social fabric with his self-interested values, prioritising his own anti-social indulgence over the needs of the community. The Festival attempted to keep at bay the negatively coded but powerful cultural values that the ‘spiv’ had come to embody. But over the next two decades, this would be a key tension that did not go away. For instance, in the 1950s, the DIY movement had the potential to be used by both the government and industrial manufacturers. As Hornsey describes, ‘like the mass-market paperback, it revealed the destabilising effects of the more assertive form of consumer capitalism that was developing by the end of the decade. Thus, while largely following the decorative prescriptions previously established by the Council of Industrial Design [COID], DIY introduced new and disruptive dynamics into the home that corroded the simple postwar formulation of domestic space as a potential site of programmed instruction.’<sup>104</sup> In Chapter 1, I demonstrate some of the ways that the visions of citizenship predicated on the careful spatial management of the home were interpreted as they commingled with mass-produced adverts, arguing that the Ideal Home Exhibition was a key site of modernity that managed these different pictures of the future.

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<sup>101</sup>The ‘Lion and the Unicorn’ pavilion, for example, adapted George Orwell’s 1941 essay ‘England Your England’. Here he praises:

... the diversity of it, the chaos! The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids hiking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn — all these are not only fragments, but characteristic fragments, of the English scene. How can one make a pattern out of all this muddle?’ When Orwell poses this question, it disguises an air of a coy smugness that secretly seems pleased that Britain is so difficult to comprehend from an outsider’s perspective.

<sup>102</sup> Conekin p. 55.

<sup>103</sup> Hornsey p. 21.

<sup>104</sup> Hornsey, p. 33.

Indeed, as scholars such as Harriet Atkinson have argued, the Festival of Britain was a ‘swan-song’ of a ‘new picturesque’ that presented a carefully controlled hybrid aesthetic that would soon be succeeded by a young generation of architects, including Alison and Peter Smithson, whose proposal for the reconstructed Coventry Cathedral had been rejected in favour of Basil Spence’s ‘new picturesque’ design.<sup>105</sup> In Atkinson’s view, the Festival architecture of the Royal Festival Hall and the Lansbury Estate was part of temporary harmony between industry and nature: in other words, it was a carefully controlled ‘mess’.<sup>106</sup> Yet this was just *one* potential design for a future that could come to fruition.

The Festival exemplified the kind of ‘designed’ futures that the Smithsons would be reacting against: making a pattern out of muddle rather than leaving it as a muddle. Even within the carefully self-styled muddle of the Festival aesthetic, there were dissident approaches to how the fragments should be reassembled: chiefly, that the muddle would not be cooperative. Barbara Jones’s exhibition *Black Eyes and Lemonade*, held at the Whitechapel Gallery as part of the programme, points to a different modernist inheritance. On the surface, this eclectic assemblage of kitsch mass produced objects (including a talking Idris Squash lemon and a fireplace in the shape of an Airedale Terrier) and folk history might have looked like an embrace of the bric-a-brac aesthetic. Yet it unsettled the premise of a designed imagined future by posing a challenge to the conventions of a top-down aesthetic system of taste and value represented by the Council of Industrial Design and this school of thought. *Black Eyes and Lemonade* put another kind of vernacular culture that was being swept away by the Festival’s carefully curated version of the popular. Lynda Nead points out the exhibition’s similarities with the interwar project of *Mass Observation*, which aimed to investigate interests such as ‘the aspidistra cult... Beards, armpits, eyebrows... the dirty joke... Funerals and undertakers.’ Although it appeared to fit in with the theme of national whimsy, it had a darker side, tapping in to anxieties about cultural loss and in this way was much more unsettling in tone than the upbeat Festival rhetoric. In this way, it looked forward to a different modernist inheritance that challenged the viability of a designed future at all: the work of the Independent Group, which the Smithsons were key members of.<sup>107</sup> Especially, as Lisa Mullen’s *Mid-Century Gothic* points out, material culture did not behave as expected, taking on disturbing agency of its own.<sup>108</sup> One of the key questions *Black Eyes and Lemonade* and its dissonant

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<sup>105</sup> Harriet Atkinson, ‘A New Picturesque’? The Aesthetics of British Reconstruction after World War Two.’ *Edinburgh Architecture Research*, 31 (2008).

<[http://sites.eca.ed.ac.uk/ear/files/2014/07/EAR31\\_HAtkinson\\_Reconstruct.pdf](http://sites.eca.ed.ac.uk/ear/files/2014/07/EAR31_HAtkinson_Reconstruct.pdf)>.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Barbara Jones’s appointment diary for Friday 15th September 1950 reads ‘Eduardo Pallozi [sic] 6.30.

<sup>108</sup> See Mullen.

place in the broader landscape of the Festival of Britain draws attention to was the impact of War on culture. Could ‘culture’ be taken as an authentic expression of particular kinds of domestic identity? If so, did it need to be protected from the new and unfamiliar cultural forms that were exerting commercial pressure on the postwar population. Had the War protected these traditional manifestations of culture or had it been diluted by exposure to mass production?<sup>109</sup>

In *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*, Jed Esty influentially argued that the thirties brought about an ‘anthropological turn’ that involved English intellectuals translating the end of empire into a resurgent concept of national culture, ‘one whose insular integrity seemed to mitigate some of modernism’s social anxieties, while rendering obsolete some of modernism’s defining aesthetic techniques.’<sup>110</sup> In his view, there was a transition from fragmentation to wholeness that helped to manage the transition from empire to welfare state. However, in this thesis I argue that *bittiness* and collage are more helpful ways of capturing the restlessness, recalcitrance and precarity of postwar British culture. Time had been inverted: ruins blasted into the present and the fabric of the here-and-now had been made surreal. Here were the indications that another art form – one that faced up to the fragment as *fragment* – might be needed to respond to the strange new world. As Leo Mellor describes:

many kinds of time itself were also presently exposed - and became resonant for writers. For bombsites contain absolute doubleness. They are inherently both a frozen moment of destruction made permanent; as much as they capture the absolute singular moment, the repeated cliché of the stopped clock exposed, battered by blast but still affixed to a wall in a bombsite: yet they also act as a way of understanding a great swathe of linear time previously hidden or buried, offering history exposed to the air.<sup>111</sup>

Additionally, the bathos of intimate life was blasted open – an aspect Louis MacNeice captured 1941 when he saw that ‘sometimes, when a house has been cut in half, you get the pleasant effect of a doll’s house – a bath in a bathroom and a dresser in the kitchen and wallpaper with roses’.<sup>112</sup> As exhibitions put on display ‘furnished rooms’ and magazines featuring similar ‘cutaway’ representations of exposed houses sought to repair this unsettled domestic, the reverberations of trauma haunted these spaces: it would not be so easy to ‘reconstruct’ the everyday. Muriel Spark’s 1963 novella *The Girls of Slender*

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<sup>109</sup> In the years following the war and throughout the 1950s ‘culture’ was politicised and the Left became focused on reconceptualising culture and using it as a way of understanding and defining British class and society. For instance, E.P. Thompson published *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* in 1955; Richard Hoggart published *The Uses of Literacy* in 1957 and Raymond Williams published *Culture and Society 1780-1950* in 1958.

<sup>110</sup> Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 6

<sup>111</sup> Mellor, p. 6.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

*Means* showed how this remained a powerful image: ‘some bomb ripped buildings looked like the ruins of ancient castles until, at a closer view, the wall-papers of various quite normal rooms would be visible, room after room, exposed, as on a stage, with one wall missing.’<sup>113</sup>

## The Search for the Ideal Home

A key site to address these questions is the Ideal Home Exhibition. Thus, my first chapter brings together the fictions that were put on display there and how they were actually appropriated, looking at texts where ideas about newness interact with more conservative ideas of domesticity. This is a location where the search for the ideal home, a question that motivated modern architects, designers, commercial companies, and urban planners with diverse politics was given physical form. This is where dreams – future-oriented fictions – are articulated. They are speculative: *pictures* of the future that are refreshed every year. Indeed, I follow Langhamer’s suggestion that the Ideal Home Exhibition is a key place to track continuities and changes between the pre-war domesticity of the 1930s.<sup>114</sup> Langhamer’s article argues that a focus on the home, its significance, meanings and lived experiences and the relationships within it allows us to explore the tensions between past, present and future within postwar Britain and encourages us to see the 1950s as ‘a period of instability rather than unthinking smug conventionality’: an aim that directly speaks to Alice Ferrebe, Kate McLoughlin and Gill Plain’s work to this end in literary scholarship.<sup>115</sup> The Ideal Home Exhibition, with its range of show homes and gadget demonstrations, was actively engaged in managing these transitions. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, the Ideal Home Exhibition had always been structured around domestic consumption as an expression of citizenship. However, the War had intensified many of these concerns. The ‘people’s war’ rhetoric encouraged people’s participation in housing planning and, as Langhamer notes, in the immediate postwar years people were enthusiastic about discussing their ‘dream homes of the future’. A Mass Observation report enquiring into people’s ‘dream homes’ concluded that:

On the whole, people (notably housewives) are very long-suffering as far as their housing conditions are concerned, and inclined to put up with much, At the same time, they are quite

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<sup>113</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means* (London: Macmillan, 1963) p. 7.

<sup>114</sup> Claire Langhamer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 40.2 (2005), pp. 341-362.

<sup>115</sup> Alice Ferrebe, *Literature of the 1950s: Good, Brave Causes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); McLoughlin, Kate McLoughlin (ed.), *British Literature in Transition, 1960-1980: Flower Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Gill Plain, ed, *British Literature in Transition, 1940-1960: Postwar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

capable of envisaging the of home they'd like. They are ready to help the planners and architects to build it for them.<sup>116</sup>

Two recent studies provide the backdrop for this project: Deborah Sugg Ryan's *Ideal Homes, 1918-39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* and Victoria Rosner's *Machines for Living*.<sup>117</sup>

Rosner's work 'investigates the ways in which modernist literature develops and communicates meaning through a new vocabulary of form substantially derived from non-literary discourses of modernity.'<sup>118</sup> So, seeking to collapse the 'dividing bar' between modernism and modernity, she places innovation in areas such as epidemiology, manufacturing and child psychology alongside architecture and literature. As such, she asserts that despite high modernism's hostility towards the domestic, it was transfixed by it: particularly by ideas about functionalism, standardisation, hygiene and the material effects of industrial developments on everyday life. The home is not relegated to modernism's backwater but was a site where the progress of machines and technology were keenly felt. Ryan, whose work stretches into the interwar period, takes the approach that the *middlebrow* is important asking: why do accounts of modernism fall short of women's lived experience of modernity?

This thesis argues that the unsettling of hierarchies of tastes in 1950s and 1960s culture requires us to rethink about these distinctions again: indeed, it is here that I want to make the claim that here we can find some potential answers to the question of why past modernist techniques no longer work for Alison Smithson's world: and this is because Smithson, along with the Independent Group and other cultural commentators, felt that the education about taste that the government was offering was about to be challenged by the power of the advert. Their attitude was that culture would change so that objects would be placed in a continuum rather than a pyramid. The historical specificity of these ideas matters hugely to this project. Like the broader project of the welfare state, these were attempts to look forward. They wanted to redirect capitalism from its task of accumulating wealth to a concern with issues of use and desire. They felt that they could take the *social aspirations* of urban planning and realise them through harnessing the power of the consumer.

Advertising in the 1950s often gestured to a dazzling world of unavailable possibilities. The oft referenced Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946 was at the time jokingly dubbed 'Britain Can't Have It' and this material scarcity continued well into the 1950s. This was a satirical riposte to the jingoism. Pictures of ideal domesticity were just that — pictures. They contrasted with a world without colour: one that can be characterised by David Kynaston's evocative word picture of Britain in 1945:

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<sup>116</sup> Langhamer, p. 346.

<sup>117</sup> Deborah Sugg Ryan, *Ideal Homes, 1918-39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018) and Victoria Rosner, *Machines for Living: Modernism and Domestic Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>118</sup> Rosner, p. 18.

No supermarkets, no motorways, no teabags, no sliced bread, no frozen food, no flavoured crisps, no lager, no microwaves, no dishwashers, no Formica, no vinyl, no CDs, no computers, no mobiles, no duvets, no Pill, no trainers, no hoodies, no Starbucks. Four Indian restaurants. Shops on every corner, pubs on every corner, cinemas in every high street, red telephone boxes, Lyons Corner Houses, trams, trolley-buses, steam trains. Woodbines, Craven 'A', Senior Service, smoke, smog, Vapex inhalant. No launderettes, no automatic washing machines, wash day every Monday, clothes boiled in a tub, scrubbed on the draining board, rinsed in the sink, put through the mangle, hung out to dry. Central heating rare, coke boilers, water geysers, the coal fire, the hearth, the home, chilblains common. Abortion illegal, homosexual relationships illegal, suicide illegal, capital punishment legal. White faces everywhere. Back-to-backs, narrow cobbled streets, Victorian terraces, no high-rises. Arterial Sevens, Ford Eights, no seat belts. Triumph motorcycles with sidecars. A Bakelite wireless in the home, Housewives' Choice or Workers' Playtime or ITMA on the air, televisions almost unknown, no programmes to watch, the family eating together. Milk of Magnesia, Vick Vapour Rub, Friar's Balsam, Fynnon Salts, Eno's, Germolene. Suits and hats, dresses and hats, cloth caps and mufflers, no leisurewear, no 'teenagers'. Heavy coins, heavy shoes, heavy suitcases, heavy tweed coats, heavy leather footballs, no unbearable lightness of being. Meat rationed, tea rationed, cheese rationed, jam rationed, eggs rationed, sweets rationed, soap rationed, clothes rationed. Make do and mend.<sup>119</sup>

As Peter Smithson wrote, looking back, American advertisements did not represent, at this time, the 'glut' they came to connote:

The way the influence of American advertising has been interpreted is that its attraction in the 1950s was that it represented a level of luxury, because of the relative deprivation from war. Rationing didn't end here til the 1950s. Various items of food and petrol and so on were still restricted. Therefore, there was not the sense you feel now about our world that generally there is too much. There was a sense of how wonderful it was that so many things were available somewhere. And spun off that is the graphics that represented this, in terms of advertising, particularly for the motor car. Because it was a high time of really exotic styling.<sup>120</sup>

They represented the possibility of the existence of another, fantastic world where things were plentiful. Alison Smithson was sent magazines from America when she was an evacuee in Edinburgh — her aunt received a food parcel, and Alison got a 'cultural parcel': a kind of 'sensitivity primer'.<sup>121</sup> 'Looking back, Peter remembered that 'Even in the wartime, it had the most fantastic advertisements for flour.'<sup>122</sup> As Lynda Nead writes, colour advertising was slowly starting to be popularised in British print culture throughout the 1950s. For instance, in 1953, Mars Ltd. ran a full-page colour advertisement for Spangles sweets. These were fruit flavoured boiled sweets that only required one point from a ration book and translated perfectly to the medium: 'each little semi-transparent, cellophane-wrapped sweet is a coloured jewel that shines and glows, a tempting note to be plucked

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<sup>119</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945-51*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 19.

<sup>120</sup> Beatriz Colomina and Peter Smithson 'Friends of the Future: A Conversation with Peter Smithson', *October* 94.(2000), pp. 3-30, p. 11.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

from the staff paper and popped in a Christmas stocking.<sup>123</sup> As late as 1954, when meat came off the ration, food and colour became symbols of abundance. The *Picture Post* published a double page spread laden with different cuts of meat, captioned ‘Once Again Old England Can Look the Advertisements in an Expensive Magazine in the Glossy Face’.<sup>124</sup>

As David Robbins writes in his account of The Independent Group, ‘an aesthetics of scarcity, with its related sense of hierarchy, a classification system born of limited amounts, was normal in the U.K. and an aesthetic of plenty – style-diversity and consumer affluence—was promulgated by the IG before they were available in postwar Britain.’<sup>125</sup> They were shocked by hearing that in Detroit they could run a production line where consumers could order colours and other variables in advance - for example, a ‘pretty-pink Model-T Ford’.<sup>126</sup> The Independent Group took seriously the idea that advertisements had achieved what modernism had struggled with thus far: reconciling art and science and creating a unity of thought and feeling. Inspired by the writings of Siegfried Giedion and Laszlo Moholy Nagy, they felt that the industrial designer and not the architect was the hero of new consumer culture. Moholy Nagy had complained that the throwaway principle in American design – because of the frequent change of models and a quick turn-over – was unpopular and that the consumer preference was for the ‘longer lasting goods of the less affluent Europeans’ but the Independent Group flipped this. They saw a connection between the avant-garde and commercialism, seeing the techniques of photomontage as the inheritors of Dadaist collage.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Nead, p. 139.

<sup>124</sup> ‘Once Again Old England can Look the Advertisements in an Expensive Magazine in the Glossy Face’, *Picture Post*, 3 July 1954, pp. 26-27; Raphael Samuel writes how ‘the appetite for the visual was nowhere more apparent than in commodity design, where, under the influence of the packaging revolution, and with the aid of silk screen printing, the look and feel for things came to count for as much as the quality and price. In the music industry record covers, which had previously been a visual blank, serving the purely utilitarian end of keeping off dust, were replaced by eye-catching, high-gloss sleeves, picturing the stars in the act of performance or dissolving them in the atmospherics of a light show. [...] In shop design, the spread of self-service stores, with their free-standing racks or open-access shelves, introduced a whole new language of ‘front display’. Goods which previously would have been laboriously weighed on scales, or tied up with string in brown paper parcels, now came pre-packed in cellophane wrappers (or, in the case of food, cling-film) and were carried away in gaily-coloured shopping-bags or gift-wraps.’ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 340.

<sup>125</sup> David Robbins (ed.), *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (London: MIT Press, 1990), p. 52.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Robbins and Highmore make the important argument that Brutalism emerges out of Surrealism. For Walter Benjamin the radical potential of the newly old is that it brings with it failed dreams of the future. As such the superannuated has the power to reveal the hubris of a present that declares itself as ‘progress’. It reveals the present not as the outcome of planning but a chaotic and contingent amalgamation. Brutalism also utilises the recently outmoded, but it does so in a significantly different way. Its ‘debris’ is from the recent past - combining the fast-paced whims of fashion with a landscape of conflict and destruction. Nigel Henderson wrote that pre-war surrealism had become invalidated by the ‘collaging’ effects of aerial bombing, which chops houses in two, or leaves a bathtub stranded in the street: ‘Who can hold a candle to that kind of real life Surrealism?’ (See

In 1956 the Smithsons, who often used advertisements to illustrate their articles, published their own manifesto on this topic: ‘But Today We Collect Ads’.<sup>128</sup> ‘Collecting ads’ was their way of renewing the modernist tradition: they observed an urban world that was flourishing in defiance of both architects and planning constraints. They felt that they needed to understand them as important information sources about ‘a way of life... they are simultaneously inventing and documenting.’<sup>129</sup> The architect’s job is to ‘get the measure’ of these impulses and ‘match them’. Just as pre-war surrealism could reveal a cultural unconscious, so could advertisements provide readymade evidence of popular fantasies and desires so that architects could see what people wanted and respond to it. They read advertisements as fictions about how people wanted to live and behave – the kinds of lives they aspired to lead. The practice of collection and collaging images together varied across the Independent Group. Eduardo Paolozzi and John McHale, for instance, mostly worked with a mixture of pulp, soft porn and cut-outs from *Life* magazine. The Smithsons, however, were more drawn to car, home and lifestyle ads from the *Ladies Home Journal* and *The New Yorker*: the textures of everyday life. These get into the composition of *Young Girl*: ‘the Ads went ticking on in her mind’, ‘her mind was making up Ads and giggling hysterically at them’, ‘Ad. Zippa foam. On your clothes in a moment. Keeps your clothes looking spinning fresh. That moist, in the wash, foaming clean—that is cleaner than clean appearance that only clothes being washed have.’<sup>130</sup>

Indeed, Smithson’s novel demonstrates literature’s affinity for registering these bitty and conflicting forms. It is in literature that we can also understand how forms are historically contingent and yet remain open to the complexity of their subject matter.

There is an example from B.S. Johnson’s *Trawl* that captures these tensions well – how the reverberations of wartime trauma emerge in strange ways into the ‘50s and ‘60s. He is describing a painful wartime experience but overlain with the language of consumer choice. As an adult, he remembers his:

Haversack of light khaki material with thin brown leather facings. The thing I remember most clearly about this haversack is that it had one single pocket on the outside, facing away from me, and that this pocket was just the size to contain the square box of a Lyons’

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Ben Highmore, *The Art of Brutalism: Rescuing Hope from Catastrophe in 1950s Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 169).

<sup>128</sup> ‘But Today We Collect Ads’, *Ark* 18 (1956), reprinted in Steven H. Madoff, ed., *Pop Art: A Critical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 3-4.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Young Girl*, p. 276.

Individual Fruit Pie, and that in this pocket there was indeed placed on this occasion a Lyons' Individual Fruit Pie. The exact variety of the fruit filling escapes me. I suspect it was apple.<sup>131</sup>

On the one hand, it captures the bleakness and the lack of choice in wartime culture (and immediate conditions of scarcity). It recalls the drab utility of military kit and rations, imposing uniformity on consumption: the 'light khaki material' invokes the canvas packs used by troops; rations in plain packaging, contained in weather-proofed cardboard boxes and comprised of Ministry of Food tins and brown packets labeled with black lettering declaring their contents and towards the end of the war, 'tea blocks' efficiently compressed tea, milk and sugar into a single cubes soldiers dissolved 'bricks' of meat and vegetable stew, and oatmeal. Johnson passively awaits to discover whether his designated pie pocket will, or will not, be filled by a parental authority, in the same way that rations came from above.

The structure of feeling that it connotes is evocative and one of lack of choice. Most obviously, this is a recollection about how something that fits the individual also suits the organisation. But seen from the 1960s, it also provides an image of the way that this was giving way to things that were perfectly fitted to you. There is a pleasing simplicity and ease to the idea that it conjures up of an individually packaged fruit pie that is tailored just to you: the same as fitted sheets or fitted kitchens. But what if you didn't want to eat a fruit pie? Or what if you didn't want to eat *that* fruit pie? Or what if Lyons discontinued that product, or changed the dimensions of the box so that it no longer slotted neatly into its designated pouch? With this particular backpack you are locked into an industrial process: two products interacting with each other that are unresponsive to the human subject's possibly-different and/or possibly-changing needs.

In *Capital* (1860), Karl Marx sets out the way that commodities communicate in their own language with each other. He posits how commodities, in addition to having a basic usefulness deriving from their material form, are also depositories of 'value'. Value in this sense refers to the 'mere congelation of homogenous human labour, of power expended without regard to the mode of its expenditure.'<sup>132</sup> In other words, value is frozen human labour embodied in the form of an object. Esther Leslie explains that 'it is work as a coagulated blob, a phantom marrow extracted by capital from the worker's labouring bones', clotted and congealed; as soon as it is formed, the commodity launches itself free from the human hands that have made it, and begins an autonomous life on the market, which, like a crystalline structure, forms itself.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Excerpted in B.S. Johnson (ed.) *The Evacuees* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1968), p. 149.

<sup>132</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2012), part I 'Commodities and Money', chapter 1 'Commodities', paragraph 8, eBook edition.

<sup>133</sup> Esther Leslie, *Liquid Crystals: The Science and Art of a Fluid Form* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), p. 59.

Commodities therefore have independent social lives, and on the phantasmagorical shop shelf they appear curiously mobile, active, animated and luminous, jostling competitively with each other to nestle in the consumer's hand — or in the pocket of his haversack. Seen from the 1960s, if the production of Lyons' fruit pies was altered, it would no longer be communicative with the haversack, and therefore the pie would stop 'talking' to you. It is true that you could carry other miscellaneous bits and pieces in there, but this would speak to the haversack's obsolescence. It would have moved into the category of the 'made-do'. And these were the forces that were being enacted on society after the war — how to adapt to a mass society where the things that you value become less valuable because of the increasing rapidity of changes on the market. The Smithsons saw this economic model (and predicted planned obsolescence) and wanted to work through what the advantages and disadvantages of this would be. Hence, as I will examine in Chapter 1, they designed a plastic house for the 1956 Ideal Home Exhibition that could be thrown away when its inhabitants no longer felt that it accommodated their needs. But is this what people wanted from their homes?

### Concrete and Domesticity

Making and *experiencing* collage are two very different things. While the Festival of Britain advocated an embryonic psycho-geographic collage of nationhood, in which a sense of place is evoked and energised by a re-mapping of the physical relics of the past, *Young Girl* buckles under their weight. The novel makes the point that her struggle with 'make do' speaks to her class and gender. *Men* would continue to write novels about this town, she laments. Indeed, the type of ordinary background she experienced was the subject of a great deal of 1950s and 1960s literature and film, best exemplified by the Kitchen Sink movement and the work of the Angry Young Men. Examples of this kind of narrative engagement with choking domesticity will be discussed later in this Introduction and in Chapter 2. But the girl, with her fantasies about boyfriends and marriages, is exactly the kind of figure of domesticity that their protagonists fear being 'trapped' by. Smithson, however, flips the common formulation that we can identify in many of these works. Smithson shifts her anguish away from the angst of setting up the household to the suitability of its location. The average suburban house, in its present form, cannot accommodate the creative *potential* of re-imagined, decidedly modern, domestic life.

This idea, that mid-century literature was engaged in tense renegotiating between the family structure and its container is well established. Yet what is lacking in the critical field is an appreciation that these live negotiations have everything to do with the built structures of New Brutalism. 'New Brutalism' is

another term that has more than one meaning. This reflects a number of things. It has allusions and in-jokes built into the name, gesturing to *béton brut* (meaning raw unfinished concrete) and *art brut*, the project of Jean Dubuffet. It was first used by Alison Smithson in 1953 and was championed by the critic Reyner Banham.<sup>134</sup> The Smithsons and Banham shared the understanding that it was an ethical and not only aesthetic project, aiming to drag a rough poetry out of contradictory forces. Banham wrote '[they] are not offering a style but a set of moral responsibilities to man and society.'<sup>135</sup> For this reason, it differs from popular understandings of Brutalism as referring to the easily identifiable massive concrete architecture that flourished in the 1960s. Rather, it describes a historically specific attitude to form-finding. As Smithson puts it, 'Brutalism tries to face up to a mass-production society, and drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work.'<sup>136</sup>

Therefore, this project will not unpack the contemporary iterations of the recent 'Brutalist revival' (although I will elaborate on some of its features in my Conclusion). Rather, it adds a concurrent story to the fascinating picture that Ashley Maher draws of literature's suspicion towards the *negative* power of design.<sup>137</sup> In her view, writers from across the political spectrum imagined that rehousing schemes threatened the individual. This culminated in J.G. Ballard's anticipatory fear that concrete forms are so powerful that they can instigate violence in its inhabitants. In his view, the tenability of architectural modernism died with the passing of literary modernism. Clean lines were not suited to a world wracked by war: society had failed to produce a new citizenry to populate these forms.

Furthermore, it was his opinion that these architectural forms were the direct products of war. He was disturbed by the feeling that fortifications along the French coast found an afterlife in popular British architecture in the 1950s.<sup>138</sup> The repurposing of military technology to manufacture materials for civilian life seems sinister to Ballard. For instance, prefabricated houses made by former aeroplane factories become dystopian. 1960s kitchens and bathrooms become 'white-tiled laboratories that are above all aseptic, as if human beings were some kind of disease.'<sup>139</sup> This description conjures the

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<sup>134</sup> She wrote 'had this been built, it would have been the first exponent of the New Brutalism in England, as the preamble to the specification shows: 'It is our intention in this building to have the structure exposed entirely, without interior finishes wherever practicable. The contractor should aim at a high standard of basic construction, as in a small warehouse.' 'House in Soho, London' *Architectural Review*, December 1953.

<sup>135</sup> Reyner Banham, 'Apropos the Smithsons' *New Statesman* 62 (1961), pp. 317-318.

<sup>136</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson, 'The New Brutalism' *October* 136, 37 (2011). Available at <[https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO\\_a\\_00038](https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00038)>.

<sup>137</sup> Ashley Maher, *Reconstructing Modernism: British Literature and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>138</sup> See Jonathan Meades, *Bunkers, Brutalism and Bloodymindedness: Concrete Poetry with Jonathan Meades* (London: BBC, 2014).

<sup>139</sup> Maher, 'Epilogue: Modernist Afterlives', Oxford Scholarship Online.

painful legacy of war, eugenics and even genocide: it is a sterile image that has been stripped of all traces of any actual domesticity that was taking place in these bathrooms and kitchens. Domesticity is presented as being inimical to these buildings.

This attitude, uncovered by Maher, leaves out the voices of those for whom transformations to domestic life were welcome, especially in the context of the housing crisis. The same prefabricated homes housed some of the first fitted kitchens that were seen in Britain, with flush surfaces and wipe-clean finishes, along with some of the first electric fridges.<sup>140</sup>

The fear was that the individual would be threatened by the architecture of the welfare state. This was an anxiety articulated across the political spectrum. Orwell, for instance, criticised the Reilly Plan of 1946 for ‘writing in’ near-totalitarianism into government-provided working-class flats.<sup>141</sup> The proposed housing scheme envisioned nurseries, community centres, communal kitchens and housing that could accommodate 1,000 people; as an exemplar of town planning, the model could be replicated across Britain. The price of increased comfort, in Orwell’s opinion, would be the erosion of individual freedom. What Orwell felt in the late 1940s was taken up by the Angry Young Men in the 1950s and 1960s. When families are ‘resettled’ it is not just privacy that is lost but Britain’s social structure, oriented around the family. Existing architectural forms, even if deeply flawed, provide a refuge for the family against an overreaching state. Peter Kalliney argues that domestic architecture is a nuanced tool that provides a structuring device for managing class continuity and changes: family homes, whether a two-up-two-down or a bungalow, serve as a ‘metaphor for national culture.’<sup>142</sup> Heterosexual masculinity emerges as a fragile and anxious construct, at once invested in domesticity but seeking to define itself against the model of citizenship inaugurated by welfare state reforms and town planning that bound the citizen to the state. Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* exemplifies this conflict. He fashions his masculinity by simultaneously resisting and inhabiting the role of husband and breadwinner. As Nicola Wilson points out, he continually fantasises about the potential for married life, transforming his illicit romances into ‘idealised’ domestic relationships.<sup>143</sup> The often misogynistic lashing out belies an optimistic attachment to the domestic that cannot find full expression and remains frustrated. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, women are caricatured in *Billy*

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<sup>140</sup> Lucy Dearlove, ‘Flat Pack: Kitchens #4, *Lecker* (2021). Available at: <<https://www.leckerpodcast.com/episodes/flatpack>>; Elisabeth Blanchet, *Prefab Homes* (London: Shire Publishers, 2014).

<sup>141</sup> Maher.

<sup>142</sup> Peter Kalliney, *Cities of Affluence and Anger: A Literary Geography of Modern Englishness* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2006); see also Gregory Salter, *Art and Masculinity in Post-War Britain: Reconstructing Home* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2020).

<sup>143</sup> Nicola Wilson, *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016).

*Liar* for being two versions of an unappealing future in which bourgeois ‘feminised’ culture comes to symbolise the fear of being trapped but he also is drawn to it.

Indeed, this challenges this pervasive attitude that women are the frail victims of false consciousness, lured in by frivolous consumer products. For one thing, there is a great deal of excellent scholarship unsettling the idea that there was a kind of ‘capitulation’ or reassertion of cookie-cutter pre-war family life. Mary McCarthy, Denise Riley, Claire Langhamer, Carolyn Steedman all testify to the diversity of domestic set-ups after World War Two.<sup>144</sup> The approach to the domestic in literary scholarship shares this. There has been excellent recent work done on – to name a few – the ‘anti-domestic’ modern spinsters and bedsitters of Barbara Pym, Muriel Spark and Rose Macaulay and on ‘queer’ domesticities.<sup>145</sup> Yet my hope is to complement these readings by shedding new light on the broadly ‘conventional’ version of domesticity itself. This thesis reads conformity *as* an expression of agency, recasting women as modernist *bricoleurs*, being handed templates that they tweak and tinker with, embody and remake.<sup>146</sup> What powerful fictions do dominant forms of media offer? What do they offer? What do they conserve? What utopian longings does a recourse to the ‘found’ does this gesture towards? Who is able to access these ‘dreams’?

To take the risks of this seriously helps us to better understand the fractures that emerged in the welfare state as a project. New Brutalism, as an ethical position, shared the same social objectives but was skeptical these could be achieved through formalised politics. In this project, I draw out the tensions between what was promised by the new world and what was available. To do so is to complicate the calibration of postwar housing projects to a perfectly coherent ideology. Instead, we can read New Brutalism as a live and tentative response to the sometimes competing, sometimes coalescing, fictions being offered to the public. I hope to realign the frame so that we can better reconstruct a live and transitional historical context that recognises the worlds in which these writers wrote.

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<sup>144</sup> Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery* (London: Virago, 1983); Claire Langhamer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 40.2 (2005), pp. 341-362; Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>145</sup> Susan Fraiman, *Extreme Domesticity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

<sup>146</sup> To this end, I want to clarify my understanding of gender as it is working in this thesis. I follow from Judith Butler and Butler’s theory of performativity. That is, that ‘gender’ is a kind of script, one that preexists the ‘actor’ inherits and that requires constant interpretation. Gender is not something that is based on an inner or essentialist truth but is the by-product of continual gender performance. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

## Chapter Summaries

The three chapters of this thesis bring literary and filmic texts into dialogue with architectural forms, considering how both are kinds of construction that are contingent on the materials to hand. As I have been emphasising, there were old materials and there were new materials to take into consideration, too. My hope is to build up a picture of some of the various ways that people experienced modernity through representations of domestic inhabitation. My first chapter explores some of the tensions I have been outlining here by looking at the Smithsons' House of the Future installation which was displayed at the 1956 Ideal Home Exhibition. This immersive structure functioned as a kind of speculative fiction following in a modernist tradition of radical experimentation but was built using new postwar technology and industrially produced materials. This chapter considers this aspirational modernity alongside the scuffed and scratched materials that can be found in the literature and films depicting lodging houses and bedsits in inner city London. I will be looking at the way that these domestic spaces contrast with the promises of the glossy visions of ideal homes on display at the Ideal Home Exhibition and in magazines and advertisements. This indexes the ways that the promise of affluence chafed against the lived experience of 'making do'. The protagonist of Nell Dunn's *Poor Cow* (1967), for instance, tries to make homes out of a series of dilapidated rooms: 'The flat out at Catford wasn't too bad, except it was filthy dirty and hospital green in every room. 'It's a filthy place, but I'll soon make it nice - hang up little cottage curtains and you need a bit of lino, say about twenty-five shillings on yer bit of lino, and then you can always collect a bit of secondhand furniture here and there.'<sup>147</sup> This chapter also looks at the ways that this predominantly white making of femininity depended on the othering of Black skin for its articulation. Lynne Reid-Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* and Roy Ward Baker's *Flame in the Streets* (1961) demonstrate what a more conservative idea of the domestic aimed to preserve.<sup>148</sup>

The second chapter explores the idea of *play* as a form of inhabitation. Having examined the textures and surfaces of uneven housing provision in inner-city London throughout the 1950s and 1960s, I move from notions of confinement to the possibilities of creative improvisation. I contribute to the discussion surrounding men's ambivalence towards domestic life – understood as pivoting around the home as a case for a woman – by reading Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* against the grain.<sup>149</sup> I argue that contemporary anxieties about social stuckness and immobility manifest themselves in the novel as the comedic caricatures of Billy's girlfriends. Each represents a possible future for Billy. For Billy,

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<sup>147</sup> Nell Dunn, *Poor Cow* (London: Virago, 2013), p. 111.

<sup>148</sup> *Flame in the Streets* dir. Roy Ward Baker (1961).

<sup>149</sup> Keith Waterhouse, *Billy Liar* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980).

comedy emerges as a way of coping with anxieties about being fixed in subtopics Stradhoughton. Yet the character of one of his girlfriends, an independent-minded young woman called Liz, gestures beyond the text to a new bracketing together of stability *with* mobility: of achieving a sense of equanimity by being able to ‘up and go’ at will. For Billy, comedy emerges as a way of coping with anxieties about being fixed in subtopian Stradhoughton. The second half of the chapter looks at positively coded transient forms. Here, I consider Alison Smithson’s essay on the caravan, her affinity with the sheltered space of children’s books and her weekend house ‘Solar Pavilion’ as some surprising and exciting examples of modernist inhabitation. This chapter concludes with the Smithsons’ attempt to evolve the concept of the domestic to match new lifestyles involving more leisure time.

*Young Girl* is a novel by an architect about a young girl; B.S. Johnson’s *Albert Angelo* (1964) is a novel about an architect that turns the book into a disintegrating building. The final chapter takes Johnson’s novel as a parable about future anxiety at the intersection of literature, architecture and education. It examines the self-proclaimed affinity between Johnson — a much examined figurehead of late modernist experimental writing — and Alison and Peter Smithson. This chapter thinks about the difficulties of planning and projecting futures, examining the fate of his architect-poet-supply teacher protagonist, Albert Angelo, to illuminate the difficult task of integrating the contingencies of the present with the long-term ‘permanent’.<sup>150</sup> After an extended analysis of the ways that the novel engenders ‘future anxiety’ (both writers and architects have to build into the future, knowing that contingency will almost certainly disprove their predictions), it considers some of the strategies for dealing with this: in particular, the collage approach of the ‘as found’. As we will see, the fictional architect Albert looks back to literature and the work of architects to try and cobble together inspiration for a postwar arts centre which remains perpetually unbuilt. Instead, the book itself insists on the materiality of its own existence as an object in time and space, calling attention to its architectural structure by framing an empty space in the form of a hole cut through several pages to reveal and disrupt the textual futurity of the narrative.

By reading *Albert Angelo* as in agreement with the Smithsons’ ethos — reacting against the plans of the welfare state but sharing its commitment to social reform, it furthers our reading of New Brutalism as an experimental form. My reading emphasises its interest in adaptability, customisation and usability: criteria that are usually not associated with its so-called harsh forms. But it also reveals some of the tensions that it was trying to shape up to at this moment, thus emphasising my point that books and buildings were both examples of postwar making.

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<sup>150</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* in *The B.S. Johnson Omnibus* (London: Picador, 2004).

My conclusion discusses some of the legacies of Brutalism and how it has been turned into concrete relics, obscuring the liveness of this historical moment. But why do these narratives saturate the present, proffering physical and affective structures for us to inhabit? Will these always be the stories that we will tell about these two decades of enormous upheaval and transition?

## Chapter 1: Surface Tensions

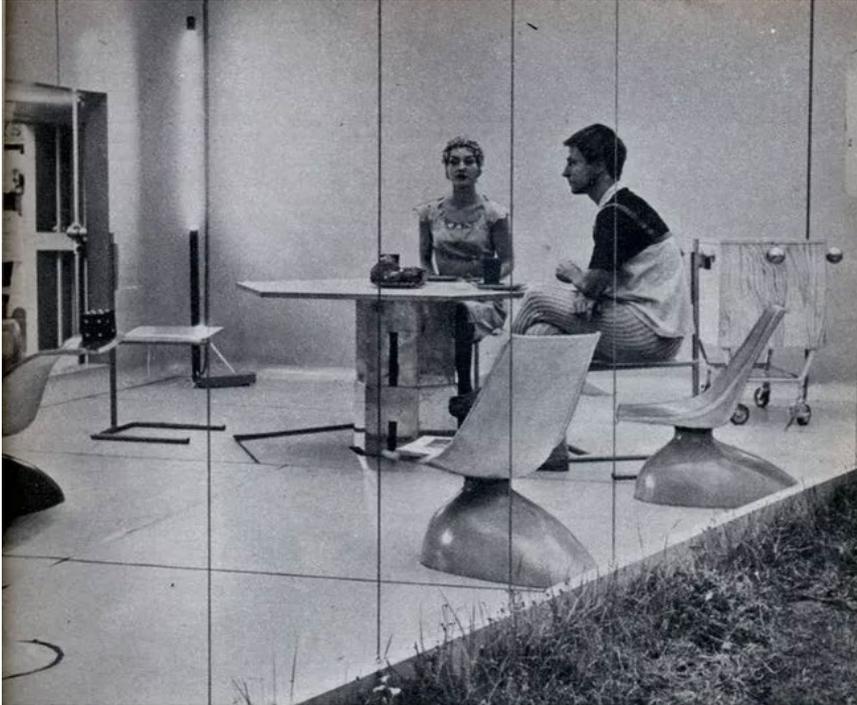
In 1956, the Smithsons exhibited their House of the Future (H.O.F.) at the Ideal Home Exhibition in Kensington Olympia. The house was a piece of speculative fiction: it imagined what life would be like in 1981: ‘Why 25 years? Because we found that consensus of opinion among the experts we consulted was that this period is likely to produce as many revolutionary changes as the past one hundred years; changes not only in our way of life, but also in the design and techniques of building the homes in which we shall live.’<sup>1</sup> The form that they produced was science fiction: a spaceship-like moulded plastic bunker outfitted with the slickest labour-saving appliances and *inhabited* by a young, glamorous couple. To quote Richard Hamilton’s famous collage from the same year: Just what is it that makes this house of the future so different, so appealing?

This is what the Smithsons, as architects, were dealing in: collective dreams, fears and anxieties. The Smithsons saw their role as belonging to a longer tradition of stimulating public tastes. The H.O.F. can be taken both as a commentary on, or social critique of, the present and as an attempt to bring about a new type of dwelling more appropriate to the anticipated needs of society. As outlined in my Introduction, 1956 was the year that they published a manifesto ‘But Today We Collect Ads’, where they articulated what they viewed to be their challenge as modernist architects. They saw that advertisements were challenging the traditional influence of the architect on showing people what they want, which posed a problem for the project of reconstruction. But the Smithsons saw that adverts had the power to achieve the social democratic aims of the welfare state via alternative channels. For this reason, they were both ambivalent and excited about them. With the House of the Future, they had a chance to see whether they could create a piece of three dimensional media with the same impact as the most technologically virtuosic advertisements in the magazines of the time. They saw that advertisements showed the audience a whole way of life. Furthermore, the Smithsons recognised that a House of the Future would need a modern citizen of the future to inhabit it. They had to imagine that ‘the aspirations visible in the advertising of the ‘fifties had been consumed and the machine-served society [was] already in existence.’<sup>2</sup> What kind of life would this subject lead, and how would this differ from the lives being led in the mid 1950s?

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The House of the Future’, Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition, Olympia, 1956, catalogue of exhibition, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic 1955-1972* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1973), p. 8.



Main room of 1980 home adjoins central garden. The dining table can sink into floor.



Short-wave transmitter with push buttons controls radio-phonograph-color TV set.

## This is a House?

*British architects have designed this Home Of The Future to prove that living will be much easier in the brave new world of tomorrow.*

**S**TAR of the London Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition of 1956 was this eye-opening Home Of The Future designed by architects Alison and Peter Smithson. It is a one-bedroom town house that contains a garden within it. The shell is moulded of plastic-impregnated plaster and the roof is covered with aluminum foil to reflect the sun's

Figure 1.1 'Ideal Home Exhibition' by Alison and Peter Smithson (1956). Source: *Modern Mechanix*.

The H.O.F. took its form from labour-saving technologies that were built into the structure itself. Beatriz Colomina observes that whereas advertisements for Tupperware promised to turn any house filled with the dream material, plastic, into a ‘dream house’ from the inside out, the Smithsons experimented with turning the container, the house itself, into plastic.<sup>3</sup> It was a moulded, fixed form: like a lunchbox, yes, but also a TV dinner tray or even an Addis washing up bowl.<sup>4</sup> The chairs were designed for this house and made by Thermoplastics Ltd. The folding Pogo chairs, described as ‘relics of the previous constructed technology’, were made from steel and Perspex, while the ‘Egg’ chairs (one was honey coloured and the other citrus yellow), the ‘Petal’ (in pimento red and honey), and the white ‘Saddle’ were moulded in reinforced polyester resins. The kitchen sink, like the sunken bath, all the hand basins and the shower cubicle were a Bakelite polyester/fiberglass moulding in pimento red made by Fibromold Ltd. The mattress and headrests for the bed were the bed were made from latex foam by Dunlopillo and covered with nylon. The bedding consisted of a single red nylon sheet and the cushion in the living room was covered in royal-blue nylon fur. The working surfaces were Pitch Pine Wareite. Even the food had been packed in airtight plastic containers with herrings wrapped in polythene and eggs without shells individually packed in little sachets, the whites separated from the yolks.<sup>5</sup> This meant that ‘the appliances would be so closely integrated into the structure, that to change the refrigerator would be like getting a larger glove compartment in a ‘Volkswagen’ dashboard—it would be simpler to get a new car.’<sup>6</sup> But why would this be a good thing? They were working through how to balance fittedness and flexibility. If it is easier to get rid of the entire car than it is to replace a part, then it anticipates a culture where a commodity’s inability to adapt stimulates the purchase of upgrades and wholesale replacements.

To buy a throwaway house means that its inhabitants can buy an entire product that fits their life better, trading in the closed loop of the perfectly coherent lifestyle pitched by one advertisement for the latest model. Indeed, the Smithsons imagined that the H.O.F. would be a house of the future, jostling alongside other ads, participating in the rapid flow of popular imagery: briefly dominating before being replaced.<sup>7</sup> This turns the house into an expendable object. It anticipated that its occupants would move on to somewhere new: its target market was a young couple without children.

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<sup>3</sup> Beatriz Colomina, ‘Unbreathed Air’ in *Alison and Peter Smithson: From the House of the Future to a House of Today*, ed. by Dirk van den Heuvel and Max Risselada (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2004), pp. 31-49, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> The first example of domestic moulded hollow ware in Britain was the polythene washing-up bowl in 1948. It was met with scepticism, but between 1948 and 1957 ‘Alkathene’, the brand of polythene used for household wares, rose from less than one per cent of the UK’s annual production to nearly 40 per cent. Coloured plastic washing up bowls and brushes were such a novelty that they could be purchased gift-wrapped ready to give as a wedding present. See Ferry, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> See Colomina, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> The Appliance House, *Design*, May 1958, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Colomina, p. 35.

This was a radically different way of thinking about property at a time where home ownership was becoming a more achievable aspiration. The H.O.F., on the contrary, suggested that houses need not be a durable deposit of capital. If they are modelled on a big piece of equipment then they can be moulded to the most pressing needs of the *now*.

The Ideal Home Exhibition and its attendant literature was an outlet for architects and designers to communicate their designed futures with the public. Exhibitions were a meeting point between these designs and the economic and material realities of visitors' present lives. These pictures of potential futures were not simply accepted and imbibed, they were appropriated in many different ways. Later in their writings, the Smithsons described this tentative 'handing over' as continuous with a role going back to the Renaissance:

The architects of the Renaissance established ways of going about things which perhaps we unconsciously follow: for example, between the idea sketchily stated and the commission for the permanent building came the stage-architecture for the court masque; the architectural settings and decorations for the birthday of a prince, for the wedding of a ducal daughter, for the entry of a Pope into a city state; these events were used as opportunities for the realisation of a new style; the new sort of space; the weight of decoration; made real for perhaps a single day... the transient enjoyably consumed, creating the taste for the permanent.<sup>8</sup>

It is notable that the Smithsons drew a comparison between their practice and courtly iterations of impermanent architecture. Such a stratified, top-down society has implications for the way that we might think about transience and its relationship to class. Would these 'positive' kinds of transiency 'trickle down' - implying that a classed society would not be overturned so easily? As this chapter will show, transiency was experienced differently from different positions. Does the 'transient enjoyably consumed' really create the taste for more transience: a taste for an intensely changeable throwaway culture where a house might be cast off and disposed of. And how does this interact with the actual transiency that was experienced in the postwar period as precarious populations set up provisional homes? To understand the instabilities of an England that was, in many ways, characterised by dreary conservatism and enduring hardship but also poised for a freer, more prosperous future, we should consider how discourses of newness saturate the old. To do so, we will move from the glossy, smooth plastic of the H.O.F. to another material that could be commonly found in the 1950s and 1960s: linoleum.

To understand why someone would want a plastic throwaway house, you first have to understand what it is that is being thrown away: time-consuming domestic labour predominantly carried out by women. I will now turn to the early history of Lino and its marketing in order to know how its image

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33

would change radically in the period. By examining this, it is possible to determine that there is a clear turn from dreamy comfort to tattered cheapness.

The troubled relationship of smoothness to gendered labour is exemplified by the covert allegiance established between women and linoleum over the advertisement campaigns that stretch back to linoleum's inception. As is elucidated in 'Comfortable, Durable, and Decorative: Linoleum's Rise and Fall from Grace', in 1924 an American advertisement included in a 'Selling the Linoleum Floor Idea' advertising package put together by Armstrong Cork Company told 'The Story of a Woman and a Floor'.<sup>9</sup> The copy is phrased so that linoleum is positioned as a 'reward' for being a 'good girl' and doing her housework. 'You are about to read the story of a woman who does her own housework, and how she happened to get this beautiful linoleum floor', begins the captioning text: the ad-prose takes up the naive simplicity of a fairytale, absorbing all allusions to labour and exertion into its smooth surface. The ad opens with the image of a housewife burdened with the ceaseless maintenance of her soft wooden floors, scuffed and 'shabbied' three times a day, everyday, by her children's shoes. 'Every time the woman looked at the floor, she sighed,' the advert laments, and this modern linoleum floor pledges to be a 'glowing, smiling floor: an easy-on-the-nerves-and-feet floor'. Easier on the feet but also easier on the knees for cleaning, too.

In *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (2010) Anne Anlin Cheng posits how female skin is integral to understanding the appeal of high modernist surfaces, seeking to construct an 'intricate and inchoative narrative about how the inorganic dreams itself out of the organic, and how the organic fabricates its essence through the body of the inanimate.'<sup>10</sup> She argues that 'epidermal surfaces (from flawless skin to a perfectly shaped glass tear on the cheek to the celluloid sheen of hair) were uniformly transformed in the twentieth century into synthetic surfaces.'<sup>11</sup> Reciprocally, female bodies (specifically the racialised body of Josephine Baker) gleam at the threshold 'where human skin morphs into modern surface', stimulating a 'sexy interplay between the scopic and haptic: are we looking or are we feeling?'<sup>12</sup> Cheng provides an important way of thinking about what happened between the early twentieth century and the mid-century, and the background against which post-war modernity had to define itself:

If today we are less receptive to the expression of the potentiality between aesthetic style and ontological presence, between thingness and agency, it is partially because we no longer share

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<sup>9</sup> Pamela H. Simpson, 'Comfortable, Durable, and Decorative: Linoleum's Rise and Fall from Grace', *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 30.2 (1999), pp. 17-24, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

the ideal of plasticity or shine rooted in early century material nova. If materials like plastics, Bakelite, celluloid, promised a new compatibility between the organic and the inorganic, then by the mid-twentieth century, the larger generic category of plastics had degraded to associations with things cheap, insipid, and painfully artificial.<sup>13</sup>

Lino, fitting into this category in the 1920s and 1930s becomes, by the 1950s and 1960s, more about a question of cost. In the literature of the time, it can be found in representations of working class spaces, in non-aspirational décor. If plastic is ‘speculative fiction’, lino is more ‘kitchen sink drama’. In novels about migrant and precarious lives it is possible to find more lino. As scholars such as Clair Wills, Chiara Briganti, Kathy Mezei and Emily Cuming have demonstrated, London’s poorly regulated ‘Bedsitland’ of rooms, ‘digs’ and shared housing housed thousands of people and families in substandard conditions.<sup>14</sup> As Wills argues, lodging houses were a reminder of the persistence of an ‘underclass’ despite the claimed gains of postwar affluence. In many cases, conditions in subdivided Georgian and Victorian houses were as bad as the pre-war slums. As the *Daily Mail Book of Ideal Homes* put it:

It is all very well to talk about ideal homes, but very few of us have them. More than half the people in the country are living in cramped quarters. If you have to make a home out of one room or two, or half an old-fashioned house, your problem is a very real one and one which a great many people have to face.<sup>15</sup>

It is against this background that linoleum appears as a surface that lines these marginal sites of modernity where time and space warps and wears out. These lodging houses were architectural relics in ruinous condition but they were also crucibles of modernity: ‘in fact, many immigrants were settling in the crumbling remains of a decaying British infrastructure, literally taking up residence in the holes and debris left by war (many rooming houses were located in terraces with gaps in the middle where houses had fallen down.)’<sup>16</sup> In one anecdote recorded in *Putting on the Style*, an interviewee named Connie Mark remembered a furnished room that she lived in in Kensington where ‘mattresses were torn, chairs ripped, tables barely stood up, bureau drawers worked poorly or were missing altogether, and inevitably putrid odours emanated from fabrics, curtains and rugs.’<sup>17</sup> The repeated use of the past participle here describes a lack of agency in this — these things have happened, and are carrying the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> Clair Wills *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-war Britain* (London: Penguin, 2017), Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei eds. *Living With Strangers: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film* (London: Routledge, 2020); Emily Cuming ‘Boarding and lodging houses: at home with strangers’, *Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880-2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 73-122. Available at: <doi:10.1017/CBO9781316576830.003>.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Sally MacDonald and Julia Porter, *Putting on the Style: Setting Up Home in the 1950s* (London: The Geffrye Museum, 1990), no page numbers.

<sup>16</sup> Emily Cuming, *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> MacDonald and Porter.

past. Corroborating this, Margot Czajowski recalls a furnished room in Willesden decorated with ‘heavily patterned wallpaper, flowery cretonne curtains, and a filthy white ceiling.’<sup>18</sup> ‘Heavy patterns’ become equivalent with a filthy ceiling: the surface is understood as having too many things applied on top. She describes how ‘you put down any damned thing on the floor. We bought lino ourselves and we put lino on the floor, but there was nothing like carpet.’<sup>19</sup> Lino becomes just another indiscriminate layer to be applied out of necessity: if she really had a *choice* she would choose soft, fitted carpet.

Furthermore, following the lino gives an indication of how ideas about skin had changed by the 1950s and what the Ideal Home Exhibition sought to uphold: it reinforced ideas of whiteness. The Ideal Home Exhibition resolved collective desires and anxieties by working through them and turning them into forms. It sought to draw boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and the uneasy projection of internal problems onto an ‘external’, alien presence. As Stuart Hall puts it in his essay ‘Racism and reaction’ (1978), ‘this is not a new problem brought about by postwar immigration. Rather, it is an internal feature constitutive of ‘Britishness’: ‘It is in the sugar you stir, it is in the sinews of the famous British ‘sweet tooth’ - it is in the tea-leaves at the bottom of the next ‘British cuppa’ - the systematic denial of this (internal) overseas history, by turning what is inside out, it installs a series of binary oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them, ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’.<sup>20</sup> Racism works through a displacement of its colonial history – the trade in the precious commodities of empire and also importation of cheap labour.’ Social inequality is a structural feature of capitalism that is essential to its running: it needs to exploit the many for the benefit of the few to generate profit. The Ideal Home Exhibition responded to the fears about the declining powers of Empire and the future of race and nation. One of its functions was to shape the role of the dutiful imperialist citizen of the future who could take part in a shared sociability through acquiring consumer goods. What you wanted mattered. Linoleum is a Victorian invention: a profit of the Industrial Revolution and Empire. In 1875 William Morris patented an African marigold pattern for printed ‘Corticine’ floorcloth in 1875 that remained available in the Morris & Co. catalogue in 1900.<sup>21</sup> Rosalind Williams describes the Ideal Home Exhibition as an enormous department store, feeding a ‘dream world of mass consumption’ that positioned consumers as audiences to be entertained by commodities as ‘selling became ‘mingled with amusement’ and the arousal of free-floating desire [was] as important as immediate purchase of

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Hall quoted in James Proctor, *Stuart Hall* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> Simpson, p. 18.

particular items.’<sup>22</sup> Within this context, the H.O.F. speaks to the particular visibility of racialised skin and fear of miscegenation that hovers in the shadows of this pink-skinned plastic house that is clean and sterile. The smoothness and modernity of 1920s lino has been taken over by the new and even more radical smooth fittedness of 1950s plastic. Colomina reads the H.O.F. in a Freudian way, describing it as:

a series of organic shapes, a body of honey-coloured translucent skin, and pimento-red orifices, organised around a central, folded, furry opening: a sexual organ pushed into the face of the viewer like Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant Donnés*.<sup>23</sup>

Yet its surfaces were aseptic and sterile. The blanketless bed had a single nylon sheet and sunk into the floor when not in use. There was a self-cleaning bathtub that rinsed itself with detergent. The house’s continuous smooth surface with rounded corners could be maintained with a damp cloth, banishing any trace or dirt, dust or germs. Unlike the *materials nova* of the early twentieth century, it enforced a hard barrier between thing and thing.

### **‘You can’t make a mark on it!’**

It is helpful to situate the literature of the 1950s and 1960s within the context of the rebranding of plastics that made smoothness more accessible. Whereas in the 1930s the hygienic virtues of whitewash, with its clinical sterility and associations of precision and virtue were appealing, after the drabness of wartime both advertisers and design commentators promoted the idea that household chores were more satisfying if they were carried out in an attractive environment. For example, in 1947, the British company De La Rue secured the license for the UK and European production of Formica. They pursued the US marketing strategy:

You’ll be happy ever after when you have a jewel-bright clean-at-a-wipe ‘Formica’ Laminated Plastic work-tops in your kitchen. A ‘Formica’ table alone cuts down your chores more than you would credit. This tough, satiny surface is lovely to look at and lovely to live with – for a lifetime. You simply can’t make a mark on it without drastic misuse – it won’t stain, won’t chip, won’t crack.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast with the pastel tones of the interwar period, the mid-century ‘heralded a new celebratory mood in design that was ultimately transferred to domestic settings through paint and PVC, linoleum

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<sup>22</sup> Rosalind Williams quoted in Deborah Sugg Ryan ‘All the World and Her Husband’: The Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition 1908-39’ *All The World and Her Husband: Women in the 20th Century Consumer Culture* edited by Maggie Andrews, Margaret R. Andrews, Mary M. Talbot (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Colomina, p. 114.

<sup>24</sup> Kathryn Ferry, *The 1950s Kitchen* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2011), p. 30.

and laminates.<sup>25</sup> The aspiration was a perfectly smooth space that could be achieved through products. In this new age of petro-chemicals, plastics were marketed as an affordable way to modernise homes. The aim was to achieve the impression of mouldedness so that everyone could aim towards this smooth space by purchasing, for example, ‘sticky-backed’ adhesive plastic fabrics that you could apply to kitchen surfaces: Fablon and Stix-On for covering shelves and draining boards; Congowall, the tile-look-alike’ in glueable sheets with a glossy cellulose finish for less than 10 pence per square foot and Everine polystyrene wall tiles that were ‘flawlessly moulded... with bevelled edges and a glass-smooth finish.’<sup>26</sup> As Ferry writes:

The post-war fitted kitchen felt modern because of its coherence, unified cupboard made full use of wall space above and below a single work surface while flush eliminates unhygienic dust traps. It saves labour because everything was thought through in advance. Appliances were slotted into the overall scheme and utensils were stored easy to hand. By the 1950s kitchen design had found a place in popular culture and whether it was discussed in architectural journals, women’s magazines, household manuals or recipe books the emphasis was always on proper planning. The look became sleeker and more glamorous as the decade wore on, making kitchens as subject to changing fashions as the women with pinched-in waists who inhabited American-style advertisements selling the dream.<sup>27</sup>

On the one hand, therefore, there are have the glossy, sci-fi fantasies imagining how to live: on the other, realist literature registers the messy reality – where new and old come together, in scuffs. The catalogue for the Ideal Home Exhibition captures this distinction well:

In most middle-income homes virtually nothing has changed in the past quarter of a century. We still have very nearly the same inconvenient, inefficient pattern of living as our parents and even our grandparents. But consider the progress in other fields. You can cross the Atlantic in a few hours. You can telephone to the ends of the earth. You can destroy an entire city with one hydrogen bomb. You can be cured of diseases that were once killers. But the pipes still burst. The draughts still blow. The dust still hides in corners. And the boiler still goes out.<sup>28</sup>

The reading of the aspirational visual currency of the H.O.F. helps to contextualise the meaning of broken and smooth surfaces in these texts. To think about how we might take literature as a ‘counter text’ I will begin here with a close reading of the opening passage of Nell Dunn’s 1967 novel *Poor Cow*.<sup>29</sup> Here we meet Joy, who has just left hospital with her newborn baby and is returning to her one-roomed flat. The first thing that strikes her is the smell of sour linoleum:

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition (1956), p. 98 [catalogue].

<sup>29</sup> Nell Dunn, *Poor Cow* (United Kingdom: Virago, 2013).

Joy hurried painfully up the stone steps of her one-roomed flat. The whiff of sour lino hit her in the face as she opened the front door; it was the odd slices of green-pitted lino she had sometimes seen saved by dustmen and tied to the back of their lorry.<sup>30</sup>

From this pervasive ‘sour lino’, which offers a metonymical test for the room’s accommodative capacities as a whole, it is possible to deduce that this domestic environment is irreversibly ‘spoiled’, though it is not yet clear what this means. The lino is presented in terms of food: ‘green-pitted’ refers to its worn out condition but might more readily make you think of pitted cherries, plums and peaches, varieties of stoned fruits, green when unripe. This variegated appearance is compounded by the phrase ‘odd slices’ – ‘oddmments’ are the discarded leftovers are the discarded offcuts that are left over from the making or shaping of something else; ‘slices’ invokes an assorted spread of meats (spam or ham, perhaps) salvaged from previous teatimes. The overall effect of this awkwardly reconstituted floor surface is a creeping feeling of strangeness (‘odd’ in this sense). Having whetted the sweet and savoury palate, the reader then learns that these foods came from a bin lorry – a sudden revelation which leaves a sour taste as rapid decomposition takes place over the course of a single sentence. Linoleum is newly experienced as an unpleasant mouthfeel, as this sudden transgression of imagined boundaries triggers the disgust reflex. This bodily revolt is generated by the too-close proximity of the consumable to the throwaway: food and rubbish sit uncomfortably next to each other, as in a tiny bedsit kitchen. This metaphorical language of organic expiration is compounded by the material composition of linoleum and its physical capacity to go sour. An artificially produced organic substance, its modern one-piecedness is compromised when it starts to decay. If it is neglected or poorly maintained, its unblemished veneer succumbs to a variety of naturally occurring faults, as the compositional linseed-oil continues to oxidise. This can cause ‘the lino to darken in areas not exposed to light, such as under appliances or furniture’, a process that renders it brittle and susceptible to cracking. At this particular intersection of the organic and inorganic, linoleum can be conceptualised as a form of mechanically manufactured ‘skin’. Scuffs and scratches to surface register certain kinds of unwanted traces: the traces of other people’s lives gone sour.

As Briganti and Mezei write, ‘as fixtures in the rented space, the objects can’t be moved elsewhere, the lodger must adapt to them, not the other way round. Although the ‘stuff’ of bedsits and boarding-fiction is shabby and downtrodden, it is also paradoxically more secure in its context than the lodger; it will always outlast him/her. This is the objects’ territory – the lodger is only a passing guest.’<sup>31</sup> Here linoleum comes into its own as a record of passing-through inhabitants crowded with too much past. This was not just a metaphorical question of friction. Katharine Whitehorn’s *Cooking in a Bedsitter*

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<sup>30</sup> Dunn, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Briganti and Mezei, ‘Chapter 6. Cold Rooms in the Post-War London Novel’ Accessible at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350016552.ch-007>.

was published in 1961. She writes how in a bedsit kitchen there is nowhere to put anything – the opposite to the H.O.F., with a dedicated place carved out for everything – and so you come up against mess and muddle:

Cooking a decent meal in a bedsitter is not just a matter of finding something that can be cooked over a single gas-ring. It is the problem of finding somewhere to put down the form while you take the lid off the saucepan, and then finding somewhere else to put the lid. It is finding a place to keep the butter where it will not get mixed up with your razor or your hairpins. It is having your hands covered with flour, and a pot boiling over on to your landlady's carpet, and no water to wash up any of it nearer than the bathroom at the other end of the landing. It is cooking at floor level, in a hurry, with nowhere to put the salad but the washing-up bowl, which in any case is full of socks.<sup>32</sup>

This is strikingly different to the message promoted by this 1950 editorial in *Woman's Own*, describing the kitchen like so:

This is the room more than any other you love to keep shining and bright... A woman's place? Yes, it is! For it is the heart and centre of the meaning of home. The place where, day after day, you make with your hands the gifts of love.<sup>33</sup>

From this, then, we might imagine linoleum as functioning in these texts like Sigmund Freud's Mystic Writing Pad, a kind of skin-like membrane registering the rhythmic patterns of everyday domestic life as articulated within one or two rooms.<sup>34</sup> In 1925, Freud posited that the 'Mystic Writing Pad', a children's toy of the time (a predecessor of the 1959 Etch-A-Sketch) functions as a kind of palimpsestic text that makes use of a 'shock-absorbing' buffer to mediate between surface and archival capacity. The Mystic Writing Pad happens to be made from a similar compound of materials as linoleum. Linoleum is comprised of a tough but elastic top layer as the gummy mixture of oxidised linseed oil, ground cork dust, rosin, gum and pigments are pressed between two heavy rollers onto a canvas backing. The Writing Pad has a similar waxy organic texture: it is 'a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a paper edging; over the slab is laid a thin transparent sheet,' comprised of two parts: an upper layer of celluloid and a lower layer of thin translucent waxed paper. The 'mystic' gimmick of the Writing Pad is this ability to easily disappear writing inscribed on the top layer by raising the coversheet, yet a permanent record or trace of these marks is etched faintly onto the waxed slab below. Freud draws upon this image as an analogue for his model of consciousness, and this can be applied to the way we might figure the relationship between surface and collective cultural memory. Though the *lin* in linoleum refers to its constituent linseed oil, it also invokes the Latin root meaning 'line' – and mark-making is a kind of 'writing' itself. Linocutting is a kind of artistry that involves

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<sup>32</sup> Katharine Whitehorn, *Cooking in a Bedsitter* (London: Hachette, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ferry, p. 6

<sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad', *General Psychological Theory* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1925).

carving a linoleum sheet and then printing the mirrored design onto fabric or paper. This can be done by hand or by printing press. When marks show up on the pristine surface of linoleum, it is the result of trauma: indentations are made by trying to turn heavy pieces of furniture round to fit the room better, 'heavy traffic' such as the repeated dragging of chair legs or the clumsy accident of a sharp object like a kitchen knife falling point-down. Scuffs and scratches make visible the past written and overwritten into this spatial memory. At this point, linoleum's once smooth surface is spoiled. By paying attention to the scuffed, worn out modernity, we can find an experience of women and modernity. We can find a record of transient lives lived alongside a catalogue of shabby furniture. The contrast between the glamorous, modernised kitchens populated with relaxed, efficient housewives and the residual squalor of the Victorian world shows us a back-to-back collage of the glossy new forms on display and the kinds of homes that were improvised on the margins of society. In *The L-Shaped Room*, *Flame in the Streets*, and *Poor Cow*, the self meets the shell (the outer edges of the potential of the novel) and the traces that 'get into' the novel fall somewhere between authorial intention and the materials and textures that line the texts.

I will move through three examples looking at different attempts to experiment with homemaking contingent on the shabby materials at hand to look for another modernity outside of the glimmering promise of the future as advertised: examining three different ways of being modern. I will be using lino as a conceptual framework to pay attention to smooth and broken surfaces, women and traces.

### **The L-Shaped Room**

Briganti and Mezei write that 'in the grammar of the lodging house, the room functions as a noun (a metonym of the characters as subjects) and the hallways, doorways and staircases function as verbs, sites in which comings and goings and encounters instigate stages and episodes of plots.'<sup>35</sup> In Lynne Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room*, Jane Graham, who has been forced out of her parental home after becoming pregnant, deliberately chooses a 'shell' that reflects back to her displaced and fractured sense of self. She elects to move into an unhomely room, one that is cramped with the traces of other people's lives, as a form of self-abasement. She remakes her sense of self in this muddle, seeking refuge in its anonymity. Along the shorter arm of the 'L' runs 'some rudimentary cooking facilities, consisting of a wash-basin-cum-sink with a tin draining-board and a small cupboard with a top just large enough to hold a gas-stove, about a foot square, with a grill and two small

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<sup>35</sup> See Briganti and Mezei.

elements. Under the window, with its dirty-looking brown curtains, was a small kitchen table scarred with ancient cigarette burns.<sup>36</sup> The kitchen is ‘equipped’ (if you could go that far) with ‘two bent forks, a tin-handled table knife and a bread knife, one ordinary spoon and two teaspoons almost black with age and egg, a fish-slice with a burnt handle, and one of those cutters that enables you to make wavy chips.’<sup>37</sup> If the House of the Future needs a slick, modern subject to live in it, Jane feels that this ill-equipped space reflects her displacement. The longer, wider arm of the L contains:

A camp bed covered with the remains of a wartime afghan, made up of lopsided squares, ill-knitted from scraps of clashing wool and full of dropped stitches; there was a chest of drawers, leaning drunkenly over its missing leg; a kitchen chair and an arm-chair with the thin brown cloth of its seat bent by the hernial pressure of escaping springs and the arms worn shiny by many grimy hands. There was also a small gas-fire beneath the mantelpiece, on which stood a pair of hideous plaster Alsatians standing guard either side of an embroidered picture of a crinoline in a cottage garden. The walls were covered with the regulation nicotine-coloured paper splashed with dead flowers, peeling in many places. The floor was lino: it looked as if it had had football played on it in cleated boots. There was a hallowe’en coloured rag rug in front of the fire.<sup>38</sup>

The room leaves no space for inhabitation as it bears the marks of the past. Organic and inorganic are not in harmony: they have moved into the category of disgust as the floral wallpaper is described as though it is smattered with flecks of dead organic matter; it is tobacco-coloured but it also suggests being discoloured by years of cigarette smoke. The room is broken up into irreconcilable units, down to the lopsided and irregular squares of the blanket. Filth accumulates with the addition of each descriptive clause, collecting on top of the battered lino floor. The lexicon of war, conflict and injury augments – ‘the remains of wartime’, ‘clashing’, ‘missing leg’, ‘hernial pressure’, ‘guard’ – haunting the prose. Stepping outside of the expected trajectory of her life, this *impasse* gives her the space that she needs to remake her sense of self: from where she is standing, she catches sight of herself in ‘a small fly-spotted mirror over the sink’, her face ‘not a pretty sight at present.’<sup>39</sup> In her work on Jean Rhys, Laura Frost identifies a pattern of repetition and avowed helplessness that she argues is crucial to the modernist experience of ‘unpleasure’.<sup>40</sup> Jane also experiences this melancholy pleasure, inheriting a legacy of anonymous women-in-rooms. In Frost’s reading, a state of *impasse* comes about through friction as a character is impeded or blocked by a collision of forces. This is a ‘pattern that reflects a desire for abasement, tension, and deadlock – a staging of suffering that is not passivity but

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<sup>36</sup> Lynne Reid Banks, *The L-Shaped Room* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 48.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Laura Frost, *The Problem With Pleasure: Modernism and its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

determined negation.<sup>41</sup> This friction takes on a physical dimension in *The L-Shaped Room* as Jane's sense of self is 'roughed up' by her encounter with the 'other' and then smoothed over again through acts of homemaking as she literally furnishes her desired identity.

She wants to bury herself 'in this alien world... feeling that I and the other inhabitants would scarcely speak the same language, and that they would all remain unknown to me except as closed doors to pass, or occasional footsteps or voices through walls.'<sup>42</sup> She is buffered by familial money (even if she has been temporarily cut off) so she does not have to interact with the institutions of come under surveillance - she is not subjected to the kinds of policing that governs, for instance, John's life.<sup>43</sup> She chooses her situation as is demonstrated by the fact she knows that Dottie's flat represents clean modernity. When she is discharged from the hospital she 'experienced again the initial impact of the tobacco wallpaper and chocolate paint, the threadbare linoleum, the high gloomy ceilings... I thought hungrily of the scarlet-and-white cleanness of Dottie's self-decorated flat, with all mod cons and an atmosphere of spanking modernity.'<sup>44</sup> And Dottie understands this self-abasement, relating to this self-inflicted punishment:

'Oh, I see! You felt you weren't good enough to be anywhere nice! Well, do you know I've felt just like that. When I flopped at my first job, I was so fed up with myself that I thought I wasn't worth any decent firm's money, so I went off and got a frightful job working in a dirty old canteen, just to punish myself, sort of. Then when I'd proved I could do that really well, horrible and moronic as it was, I let myself off and got a better job nearer my heart's desire.'<sup>45</sup>

If, in Smithson's ideal version of the domestic shell as a space where identity is extemporised through the pinning up of pictures on the walls, Jane's identity is constituted by the too-thin partition walls of the lodging house. As Alistair Cartwright describes in an insightful article on the materiality of the wall, this is a boundary that asks to be tested and touched.<sup>46</sup> John, her Black neighbour, constantly threatens to permeate Jane's space through sound, vision and smell. Early on in the novel, Jane:

Sat frozen, staring at the wall, half-expecting someone to burst through it like a circus lion through a paper hoop... I felt a shiver of nervousness as the clear, hollow sound emphasised the

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<sup>41</sup> Frost, p. 182.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> James Proctor argues that the dwelling place was, perhaps more than the official point of entry, the site at which the regulation, policing and deferral of Black settlement were most effectively played out.' *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* p. 22. See also Stuart Hall, 'Reconstruction Work: Images of Post-War Settlement' in Ben Highmore (ed.) *The Everyday Life Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 260.

<sup>44</sup> Banks, p. 188.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>46</sup> Alistair Cartwright, 'Life Between Walls: Race, Subdivision and Lodging Houses in Postwar London' *Architectural Histories* 8.1 (2020). Available at: <<http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.378>>.

thinness of the barrier. Suddenly the knocking changed. It was on glass this time, near the ceiling. I looked up and saw, in the little window, a huge black face.<sup>47</sup>

Jane is dually repelled and attracted. This is one of the first moments that she explicitly links her sense of her own whiteness to John's Blackness, catching sight of her 'own face in the mirror, as deathly white as the other had been black.'<sup>48</sup> Flopping to the floor with fright, she reflects, 'If I had to be alone, why hadn't I found myself somewhere bright and clean to live?' Instead, she has 'chosen, of my own free will—to come and live in a bug-house. There was a black man watching me and things crawling in my bed.'<sup>49</sup> Cartwright argues that this spatial organisation, which Jane initially recoils from, proves crucial to the formation of alliances and allegiances. In his reading, the text projects a possible community 'for which the lodging house serves as the only plausible container.'<sup>50</sup> The book expresses a 'muted utopianism', projecting and enacting community despite the design to 'divide, isolate, alienate, exploit; to separate people and to corral them together; to reproduce otherness and extract profit. This is an important reading that redeems its sentimental tendencies. However, my reading diverges from Cartwright's because, in my view, there is more to be said about the way that this community produces a 'gentrification' narrative. John's alterity is absorbed into a cosy version of makeshift domesticity that says more about the cracks in her middle-class whiteness than true mutuality.

For example, John's room is an amalgamation of colonial representations of home. This is spatialised by the uneven portioning off of his room: he lives in the smaller square sectioned off from Jane's, precisely delineated and begrudgingly given. Her wall is smooth but his is studded. This reproduces the way that the Ideal Home Exhibition displaced its colonial history, representing Britain's colonies through sanitised images of labouring Black bodies and glimmering produce. The domestic life that was represented, such as the 1962 House in the Sun, was aimed at wealthy colonial clients such as businessmen and tourists who wanted an escape from the London cold.<sup>51</sup> Set in lush vegetation, the house celebrates an imperialist fantasy. John's room is far from this tropical-modernist vision but Reid-Banks imports another form of housing wholesale into a new setting. Fixed by the colonial gaze, it appears like a shack or a cabin that mixes together the 'lower middle-class 'gingerbread' style family house' with self-built homes constructed on abandoned plantations. Establishing, through this raced image, John's displacement, this lays the ground for him to be domesticated and made homely.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58

<sup>50</sup> Cartwright.

<sup>51</sup> Ideal Homes Aka Ideal Home Exhibition (1962), *British Pathé*. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51m54TheA8>>.

Jane's friendship with John becomes an important plot device for the novel as they take care of each other, cooking and decorating. Early on in the novel, she thinks of John making an omelette, 'breaking eggs with gestures like a conductor, and giggled a little.'<sup>52</sup> This leads her to relax into how she might improve the room. She begins with the walls:

I gave a tentative tug to the raw edge of the offensive wallpaper and felt how easy it would be to rip it all off. Underneath was firm light-coloured emulsion paint—pale green, perhaps. All the walls at home were pale green; it was Father's favourite colour. Against my will I heard Father's shaky voice again, telling me to go; as clearly as if he'd been with me now, I knew that he was already regretting it. For no apparent reason I remembered a photograph of him in his first-war sergeant's uniform.<sup>53</sup>

The pale green paint stages this conflict and pull she feels towards her parent's social mores and conventions. It shows that this is more about working out her place in the world: 'No, well, not pale green, then'.<sup>54</sup> She begins thinking about how she might deal with the lino: 'I passed rather quickly on to the pock-marked floor. How much would it cost to put down some of that cheap matting stuff? It couldn't be much, the area was so small.'<sup>55</sup> Next, she plans how to sew something for the arm-chair with its 'greasy chocolate-coloured cover'.<sup>56</sup> Then 'curtains—hell, any fool could make those. Perhaps John would help!'<sup>57</sup> Indeed, there are plenty of examples of this and Jane learns to depend on the community around her. John makes her wardrobe:

solid as a rock, and just the right height to hang my things on; all it needed was a curtain, and I felt nothing but the best was good enough to grace John's generous handiwork; so during the following day's lunch-hour I went to Debenham's and bought a length of beautiful yellow curtaining, with some red in it to pick up the colours in the rug which John loved. I made it up myself, with Mavis's help.<sup>58</sup>

While Jane is at the hospital, John surprises her by stripping the ugly brown wallpaper and 'it made the room bright and welcoming and almost beautiful'.<sup>59</sup> Both John and Toby delight in Jane's project. Toby remarks that he doesn't know what even the editor of *Homes and Gardens* would do to improve the room, quipping 'Well, I don't know what even the Editor of Homes and Gardens could make of a dump like this, but jolly good luck to you.'<sup>60</sup> However Jane perfectly acts out what was being

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<sup>52</sup> Banks, p. 56.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

suggested at the time by the media. Edith Blair at *Woman* magazine had some suggestions for how tenants in ‘digs’ could customise their space and would have been elated to see that Jane had followed their optimistic advice. ‘In digs, the decorating problem is to make an instant impression among furnishings that can’t be changed’:

Group some very colourful pictures together; make a collection of pictures cut out from magazines, old Christmas cards, brilliant squares of felt, and pin to a felt covered board with sparkly hatpins and brooches. Have a bowl of oranges and apples on show; a few pieces of coloured glass can look good.<sup>61</sup>

Yet as MacDonald and Porter point out, in digs, decorating was likely a low priority ‘why bother to decorate when you could be evicted at a week’s notice? Or when the room was so damp that wallpaper stained and blistered within months?’<sup>62</sup> They are skeptical of the cheery optimism that seemed out of touch with the material reality. Blair’s optimistic advice was to purchase a white or silver birch grey paint and washable wallpaper with a blue aster pattern (priced quite highly at 9s 6d a roll) to give the room ‘a feeling of vitality whatever the other colours there’.<sup>63</sup> For those not allowed to decorate, she advised hanging up a large piece of fabric or wall-paper from the picture rail.

Jane is experiencing the elation of being able to choose, relative to her previous living situation, with her father’s green walls. This is emphasised by her liberation of her possessions from his house:

Father couldn’t object to my going back while he was out and picking up some of my things. My French piece, that’d go well over the mantelpiece; some books; my bits of green glass from Majorca with which to replace the foredoomed Alsations. I might even pinch that white mesh fire screen with the plant-stands, to mask the gas-meter? Father never liked it. Get some pots of ivy to trail round, disguising things...<sup>64</sup>

It is these moments of return to comfort that we become really aware of the temporariness of her situation. With the taxi meter running, she enters a trance like fugue state as she gathers up trophies of middle-class comfort:

On my way back through the house I stole, with only slight hesitation, first a nice heavy glass ashtray, then two wine glasses, then the fire-screen, and then, as I warmed to my felonious work, a waste-paper basket, a spare pair of curtains just back from the cleaners, and last and best (or worst) a large Persian rug which had lain in the hall before I was born. I didn’t mean to take that, but I thought of the pock-marked lino, so cold to the feet and the eye, and somehow I found myself rolling the rug up and carrying it off.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Cited in MacDonald and Porter, no page numbers.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Banks, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

The objects act on her: she is compelled to take them. They take on a magnetic quality: ‘Now with my new to-hell-with-it outlook, every shop window with relevance to house interiors drew me like a magnet, and I began to bring little parcels back to the house—or rather, sneak them back.’<sup>66</sup> They are also described as being addictive in its comfort and novelty: ‘I was settling into a routine of nest-making which was as much of an opiate as a new toy is to a child.’<sup>67</sup>

Through this access to a reservoir of belongings, she is able to retain a sense of her middle class upbringing: the rug had lain in the hall before she was born. Her L-shaped room becomes a private deposit for these signs. The atypicality of this is emphasised by her landlady’s indignant reaction to this. ‘What’s wrong with the one up there? My sister made that rug with her own hands, it’s a lovely rug that is, nothing wrong with that rug! I really can’t have you bringing a whole lot of junk into the house you know.’<sup>68</sup> She typifies the nosy, prying landlady and in this context Jane’s assertion of her own preferences — rather than compromising herself to fit her rules (such as never supplying frying pans as she did not like her walls getting splashed with fat) is celebrated. There is nothing about the touch of the artisanal maker about the rug; instead, it provides another overbearing sense of somebody else’s decisions. Yet many of the power struggles that take place are resolved because Jane, who is emboldened by the security of being able to return home, calls her landlady’s bluff.

In scenes like these, the camaraderie and solidarity forged in the gaps of the spatialisation of the lodging house is clear. As Cartwright argues, the film adaptation’s closing Christmas party scene assembles this disparate collection of people in the same room. In my view, the book’s counterpart ends with cosy resolve, too. Jane goes to stay with a very different sort of ‘spinster’ character to Mavis downstairs with her collection of trinkets. Great Aunt Addy’s white cottage in Surrey is a pastoral retreat where Jane is nourished with books and food. There is no cold, marked lino here, but plush fitted carpet, ‘every floor was carpeted wall-to-wall, even the bathroom’ and every room has an open fire, ‘cheerily burning’.<sup>69</sup> In contrast to the tobacco wallpaper, ‘all the walls were white, except where they were lined with books.’<sup>70</sup> Jane goes through these books ‘like a dose of salts’: ‘there was something for every mood: thrillers, plays, dozens of biographies, philosophy and just about every classic Penguins have ever brought out’.<sup>71</sup> Addy offers Jane a model of an independent, literary woman that moves deftly and confidently between high and low material, discoursing on John

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<sup>66</sup> p. 101.

<sup>67</sup> p. 103.

<sup>68</sup> p. 74.

<sup>69</sup> p. 236.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*.

Steinbeck and Charlie Brown and Snoopy. It is through this identification that Addy employs Jane to work on her book for a salary. Addy dies suddenly and leaves her everything. This inheritance lays the groundwork for Jane's reconciliation with her father. It is Addy who remarks that Mr. Graham will have 'a sturdy little male to carry the name of Graham proudly into the future.'<sup>72</sup> The ending consists of a consolidation of wealth and status. Even Toby and John are implicated in this embourgeoisement as they are named godparents of the baby.

With a reason to return to her parental home, Jane is changed by her time in the L-shaped room. She leaves bettered by it. In a slightly overdetermined moment of revelation, a 'strange, out-of-this-world moment when I understood with absolute clarity why I'd run away to the L-shaped room' she confirms the work the room has done on changing her self-image, 'I can't recapture it now, quite but it was something to do with mirrors':

It was as if I had hated my own face and wanted to escape from the mirrors which reflected it... only the mirrors turned into people, and it wasn't my face that was ugly, but me, as a person. Now that was changed somehow, and the L-shaped room had served its purpose—as a mirrorless house would no longer be needed by someone whose blemish had gone.<sup>73</sup>

Thus Jane takes what she has learned in the L-shaped room and applies it to 'the wider field of Father's house', washing and bleaching the net curtains, as the house and its inhabitants recover in tandem.<sup>74</sup> Having said this, there is an uneasy feeling of irresolution that lingers and compromises the feeling that the ending is totally positive. She feels as though, being wrenched from the L-shaped room, she is a 'snail with a broken shell' and is left with an unresolved question of independence.<sup>75</sup>

### **Flame in the Streets**

The next example that I will turn to is Roy Ward Baker's *Flame in the Streets* (1961). The film is based on Ted Willis' play *Hot Summer Night* which premiered in 1958 at Bournemouth Pavilion. I follow Clive James Nwonka's reading of the film which argues that it has been misunderstood as a benign melodrama about a respectable white family that threatens to be broken up by a mother's hysteric response to her daughter's choice of West Indian boyfriend, who she meets while teaching at a London primary school, Peter Lincoln.<sup>76</sup> Nwonka argues that 'social problem' films displayed

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<sup>72</sup> p. 231.

<sup>73</sup> p. 309.

<sup>74</sup> p. 315.

<sup>75</sup> p. 315.

<sup>76</sup> Clive James Nwonka, 'Love knows no colour bar: Windrush, racism and Flame in the Streets', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, 12 (2020), pp. 2199-2216.

greater bravery and fidelity to the realities of immigrant life and a political awareness than their supposedly more innovative and talented counterparts. The majority of these white, anti-establishment writers ignored issues of race and offer little representation of the increasing presence of Commonwealth migration, amounting to systematic silence. Indeed, Amanda Bidnall argues that we should think about these as anti-racist, humanist films born of the same context as New Wave.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, she argues that they were primarily concerned with exposing the instabilities of the white family. Thus they disrupted white people's complacency and interrogated their innermost prejudice and in this way operated in an educative tradition. Wendy Webster also argues that they are helpful for throwing whiteness into relief, offering an insight into the ways in which white, middle-class women came to bear a kind of psychological burden of capitalist affluence. A focus on Black women in Britain, which is completely absent from *Flame in the Streets*, would tell a very different story:

A focus on white women produced a story of the period which emphasises the way in which maternity ruled, involving immurement with family and submergence in domesticity. A focus on black women produces a very different story - of poorly paid, low-status full-time employment, separation from family through the process of migration, search for accommodation in which the sign "no coloureds" was repeatedly encountered. The first view emphasises patriarchy and sees the family as a main site of women's oppression. The second emphasises colonialism and racism and sees the family as a main support and resistance to it.<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, with this in mind, the film tells us about the ways that whiteness, femininity and the home intersected. Immaculately kept by Kathie's mother, Nell, their respectable working class home is neat and tidy but it is hardly at the cutting edge of late 1950s or early 1960s style. There are clues that they are modernising slowly: they do not have fitted cabinetry but instead still have a pale blue freestanding kitchen cabinet. As Kathryn Ferry explains, this was a form of multipurpose furniture that was pioneered in the mid-1920s by Liverpool-based firm Hygena and remained popular until the 1950s.<sup>79</sup> They could include storage drawers, bins and cupboards plus a pull-out or pull-down work surface. Although the most expensive bespoke cabinets could fill a whole wall just like a fitted kitchen, with fold-out ironing boards and tables and benches, the Palmers' is fairly modest. Matching red and white tins stand uniformly on the shelves and a set of saucepans hang beneath them. Nell voices that she feels the space is outdated: the first time the viewer is introduced to her, she is using a paint roller on the walls. "I told you to leave that job for me!" exclaims Jacko, to which Nell retorts that "That was two years ago, I got tired of waiting." The exchange characterises the couple's major conflict which

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<sup>77</sup> Amanda Bidnall, *The West Indian Generation: Remaking British Culture in London, 1945-1965* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

<sup>78</sup> Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945-64* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p. ix.

<sup>79</sup> Ferry, p. 16.

centres around Nell's sense that she is being harassed by modernity and that Jacko is denying her from accessing it. Her reasonable aspiration is for a house with a bathroom. Yet despite her furor that Jacko is more interested in his work with the union than in moving on and up, this version of domestic life should be conserved against the threat of the second image. This is the interior of one of the rooms in the lodging house where Kathie's boyfriend Peter lives. With their bed in the background, Gomez and Judy wash their crockery in a bowl on the table. They live in a single room, denied lodgings elsewhere because of racist discrimination. Nell is explicit that it is this that way of living that poses a threat: 'Kathie, you don't know how they live. Like animals, 6, 8, 10 to a room. Is that how you want to end up – in one room with a horde of children?' Yet she is also not totally sure that the way she lives is worth passing on either:

Nell: I wanted her to be happy, I wanted her to avoid my kind of life.

Jacko: Did I ever deny you anything?

Nell: A house. With a bathroom.

Nell: We've been married 24 years and what have we got? Table, chairs, a bed, a telephone, what else?

Nell's anxious attachment to, and ambivalence towards, this template for conservative feminine modernity is heightened by the perceived threat of the vision of an integrated future that Kathie and Peter's relationship embodies. Maggie Andrews argues that both *Flame* and Basil Deardon's *Sapphire* (1959), to which it is frequently compared, both portray working class home-owners who see their respectability and security as threatened by their children's mixed race relationships. Lola Young critiques both films for 'explaining away' racism by locating it in individuals who are already pathologised others.<sup>80</sup> In other words, their vitriol is neatly contained in the hysteric, irrational middle-aged woman. She argues that the film's political impact is diffused by the displacement of the public to the private. Andrews challenges Young, asserting that these individuals are the products of economic, social and cultural forces which were out of their control.<sup>81</sup> In Andrews's reading, both women are, in a way, victims of false promises. She writes that Nell 'was one of those women who was tenuously clinging on to the individualist and consumerist, but unfulfilled fantasies of mid-twentieth century life.'<sup>82</sup> In her view, Nell has bought into:

the Cinderella myth, the dream of domestic fulfilment, but prior to the second wave feminism of the late 60s and early 70s, they were unable to find a language to articulate their

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<sup>80</sup> Lola Young, *Fear of the Dark: 'Race', Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Maggie Andrews, *Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the Present* edited by Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 166.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165

anger and discontent. Looked at from this perspective, racism became the public discourse which they could draw upon to articulate their own personal anger, grief and dissatisfaction which literally erupted into physical and verbal violence.<sup>83</sup>

However, such a reading minimises the way that these dreams of domestic fulfilment often consolidated *whiteness* as a vector of power that might, therefore, be worth defending – even while Nell is subjugated because of her lack of independent spending power of her own and Jacko's disinterest. Nell is less the voice of the disenfranchised and instead a mouthpiece for a status quo that was being challenged by an increasingly 'permissive' society. As I explored earlier in this chapter, the Ideal Home Exhibition negotiated the unsettled connection between family and nation.<sup>84</sup> White homes were set against the incapacity for the 'proper' home life of immigrants. Nell's repeated attacks on Kathie and Peter how's the way that gender and race intersect to reinforce notions of cultural difference that, in this case, Nell identifies more with her whiteness than her femininity. This draws attention to an important dimension of what Alison Light terms 'conservative modernity' which was 'felt and lived in the most interior and private of places.'<sup>85</sup> Commercial cultures of homemaking, in Light's view, were able to accommodate a kind of contradictory and determining tension in English social life, which 'could simultaneously look backwards and forwards; it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity, and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which went before.'<sup>86</sup> In Light's work, it is the women of the expanding middle class of the interwar period who were best able to represent Englishness in its most modern and reactionary forms. However, given the intense focus on 'home' in the postwar period, I would argue that this term can also be productively applied here.

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>84</sup> See Lola Young 'Miscegenation and the perils of 'passing': Films from the 1950s and 1960s', particularly the section 'Infiltrating the White Family' in *Fear of the Dark: 'Race', Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 84-114; see also Wendy Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, Race and National Identity, 1945-1964* (London: UCL Press, 1998).

<sup>85</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

Fig 1.2 Stills from *Flame in the Streets*, dir. Roy Ward Baker (J. Arthur Rank Film Distributors, 1961)





Just as Jane Graham feared, at the start of *The L-Shaped Room*, the protective shell of her room being permeated by John's Blackness, Nell's home is a defensive space that seeks to be touched by technological modernity that is separated from social or political change. This is spatialised as she walks through each room of the house while vocalising her fear about the space being penetrated by the mixing of skin. In one still, a decorative piece of colonial art hangs behind the incredibly beige, pale shades of Nell's skin, hair, coat and walls. The spectre of the other 'lurks' behind her sense of self. At the same time, there is a psychic disconnect that allows her to have a decorative artefact while expressing her fear that the walls will be transgressed. The erotics of racial difference and the fear of miscegenation are tools of empire, the dangerous legacy of nineteenth century race science that classified and separated races as a tool of white superiority. Robert Young calls this fear and fantasy an 'ambivalent axis of desire and aversion': a 'structure of attraction, where people and cultures intermix and merge, transforming them as a result, and a structure of repulsion, where the different elements remain distinct and are set against each other dialogically.'<sup>87</sup> Indeed, in July 1956 *The Daily Express* ran a series of articles subtitled 'Would You Let Your Daughter Marry A Black Man?'<sup>88</sup> This was a question that would be asked in various iterations and was intended to call the bluff on those who might be opposed to the colour bar but would not extend this tolerance into the 'private'. This is the hypocrisy that Jacko wrestles with. He defends his colleague Gomez at the Labour Union meeting but is vexed at the thought of welcoming his daughter's choice of partner into his home. As Gill Plain argues, the cinematic figure of the 'everyman', played by John Stuart Mills is on the cusp of becoming redundant as white masculinity reformulated itself.<sup>89</sup> Jacko's blind spots are multiple. There, is, for instance, a certain irony to the fact that he works at a furniture factory while his wife feels like she has become part of the fixtures:

Nell: If I just thought you needed me, as a person, instead of as a piece of furniture... I better go and find out what's happened to Kathie.  
 Jacko: What about us?  
 Nell: What about us? We don't matter now.

This expression of dissatisfaction is heavy with gravitas, anticipating the final scene where the two couples stand in a tense equilibrium on either side of the kitchen. Visually, it captures the difficult negotiations that the two generations have ahead. Kathie is prepared to give up the privileges extended to her by Nell, which Nell in turn views as a failure. Instead of offering reconciliation, the film asks

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), p. 18.

<sup>88</sup> See 'Thirty Thousand Colour Problems' in Lynda Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke: Art and Culture in Post-War Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 151-198, p. 168.

<sup>89</sup> Gill Plain, 'The Spectre of Impotence: Fathers, lovers and defeated authority' *John Mills and British Cinema: Masculinity, Identity and Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 173-206.

what will be the lengths that Nell and Jacko will go to protect and maintain this structure. Who will there be a place for in the future?

## Poor Cow

Nell Dunn's *Poor Cow* (1967) is also structured around exposure and concealment. The representations of Joy's homemaking captures the way that class did not disappear from an affluent society where consumer products were more readily available. Joy lives in a perpetual short term present. In his interpretation of the postwar realist novel, Rod Mengham argues that social realism, as a mode, held the welfare state to account, indexing its unfulfilled promises. Mengham's reading uses the economic language of credit and debt to highlight what was owed to those whose needs were not comprehended by the materialistic criteria of 'never having had it so good'.<sup>90</sup> This lens can also be productively applied to *Poor Cow* to focus on how this intersects with gender. In his reading of *Poor Cow*, Mengham argues that Joy's fantasies of home are restless and empty: that her attachments symbolise the impoverishment of the resources that are available to her as her 'poverty of language and feeling is related directly to her material conditions, to a poverty of opportunity that confines her psychologically.'<sup>91</sup> Joy becomes 'a vehicle for the expression of blind yearnings, unsatisfied needs, futile ambitions.'<sup>92</sup> He claims that her fantasies are fleeting and directionless as her 'attempts to replace 'nothing' with something of substance, are all absorbed by the crass imagery of consumerism, which tells her that she needs a car in order to feel in control of her life, and a stage-managed version of cosy domesticity in order to be fulfilled.'<sup>93</sup> Joy shuttles between the 'false consolations of the advertiser's dream world' and the helplessness that she feels when 'its carefully composed illusions fade away.'<sup>94</sup> On the one hand, this reading captures the centrifugal force of housing poverty and transiency that defines Joy's life. However, in my opinion, Joy does not simply naively imbibe these glossy pictures of domesticity: rather, she *makes do* with them. Mengham's reading It is not so much that Joy simply mimics the dreams and desires that appear as polished spots in the prose: as

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<sup>90</sup> Rod Mengham, 'Bad Teeth: British Social Realism in Fiction' in David Tucker (ed.) *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Available online at <[https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306387\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306387_4)>.

<sup>91</sup> Rod Mengham, 'Bollocks to Respectability: British Fiction After the Trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover (1960-1970), *Prudes on the Prowl: Fiction and Obscenity in England, 1850 to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 159-178. Available online at <<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199697564.001.0001/acprof-9780199697564-chapter-9>>.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

advertising slogans or brand names or excerpted pop lyrics. To do so, she attempts to cover over these scuffs and scratches with the cheaply available materials that she has to hand:

A battered, broken umbrella hung on the back of the door—old bacon rind and crushed food where the cooker once was. A gas mantle jutted from a cracked wall.

You see, Dave, in a week it'll be perfect. I'll get little cottagy curtains, wallpaper it out, it'll be just like a country cottage.'

So they went down the North End Road and bought a mural of a lake in Switzerland, topped by snowcapped mountains, and five rolls of left-over lilac wallpaper, for a pound, and triumphantly carried them home.<sup>95</sup>

Joy's dream is to move into a house that fits her life instead of having to patch and mend and paper over. In another flat in Ruislip, Joy 'chopped her bit of carpet into various oblongs and squares to fit the odd shaped kitchen with the sloped ceiling and the skylight and the small square of grey. The front hall smelled of damp, dusty lino — the smell of poverty, of unloved houses which people never live in for very long.'<sup>96</sup> Again, as in *The L-Shaped Room* and *Flame in the Streets*, race is represented as another form of contamination. This is exemplified by the passing comment that: 'A man broke in and done our meter last night. The police says "I pity you white women in this house with all the coloureds down the street." They could tell he was coloured from the fingerprints.'<sup>97</sup> The clear racism in this baseless assumption animates the threat of miscegenation — of being touched by unknown fingers — and also adds another kind of unwanted trace to Joy's living space, marking it out as another kind of 'dirt'.

The potential of readymade things versus the joy of the custom. Even at the level of textual construction, cliché sneaks in, so that even the readymade containers for feeling that Joy has to hand are at risk of becoming scuffed and scraped through use. Everything that she reaches for has similar lifespans. When her boyfriend Dave is sent to prison, Joy returns to clear out their shared flat and Dunn describes it in lyrical sounding prose: 'She hadn't been back since the day they took him away, but the place had lost its loving feeling.'<sup>98</sup> There she notices:

A plastic bag without a handle, an orange deckchair, and a pile of shrunken jumpers and petticoats which had had their day; Christmas lights, frosted glass candles in yellow and green and purple among them. And she remembered.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Dunn, p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>97</sup> Dunn, p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

This is loaded with cliché and lands with a cadence of melodrama. Furthermore, the first sentence can be read with the rhythm of a pop song, if you were to transpose it around the internal rhyme. Set out in this way, it would read:

She hadn't been back since the day/  
They took him away/  
But the place had lost its loving feeling.

This last line, too, redirects the reader beyond the text to the pop song of the same name, 'You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin', the 1964 single by The Righteous Brothers. Pop songs, are often future-oriented, concerned with new crushes and 'baby loves'. They polish Joy's feelings by presenting a sweetened version of real life. Pop songs are a 'universal' storytelling of a kind and they possess the perfect texture: they 'touch' you but they are also 'sticky' (they are earworms) but without making a mess. They are also an iteration of the lyrical ballad, working as a distillation of an individual, singular experience that has been expressed in a way that can be found authentic and intelligible by a public. Its clichés can be redeemed as a shorthand expression of interpersonal commonality, a smoothing over of difference into a formal container of meaning: 'What a day for a daydream, what a day for a daydreaming boy,' crackles 'The Lovin' Spoonful' from Auntie Emm's radio.<sup>100</sup> They are another way of emphasising the temporariness of these forms that can wear out quickly. It could be that you possessed that loving feeling, or, that you feel like an old piece of lino.

Joy *knows* that what she wants is beyond her means, but this does not stop her from daydreaming about it:

I know what sort of house I'd like. A house in the country. One of these old-fashioned houses. You know these old cottages, you remember the ever-so-old cottages, and I'll tell you what, they've got a long pathway and you know the trellis what goes over like that, that's the sort of house I want. Ever so plain, I don't want nothing fancy, but just nice, a proper little home. I'd have fitted wardrobes and I'd have all pale colours, I'd have blue and pink 'cause I like them. And I'd have a white dressing table, very very long, fit it in the windows. And I'd have just an ordinary bed and a white painted headboard. Oh yeah. Flash curtains I'd have. Coloured curtains I suppose, no, plain curtains. Oh, and a fitted carpet. Must be a pale colour, pale blue or something like that. Nice white bed-spread. Look lovely.<sup>101</sup>

This is not an abstract desire. Rather, it is the daydream that *fits* perfectly to her desires: 'fitted wardrobes', dressing table 'fit it in the windows', 'fitted carpet'. However, due to the centrifugal forces of housing poverty, she tries her best to customise a series of rooms that are resistant to inhabitation.

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<sup>100</sup> Dunn, pp. 18-19.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

She craves getting away from the cramped muddle that she has to 'make do' with. She is suspended in a world where everything you use gets scuffed and you spend the rest of the time cleaning up:

I can't bear the thought of all these women in the flats around me - all doing the same things - mopping down the lino, washing their husband's shirts, changing their babies, it's all gone bent on me - the everyday life - the sight of a shopping basket turns my guts. If only I had a car - I'd be able to get away - drive off and find somewhere where there weren't no television to sit in front of night after night, and no bleeding husband to clamp down on every little whim that might come my way.<sup>102</sup>

Joy's lowest moment is mediated through housework which is emphasised by the atomised image of women in separate flats. Any sense of communality dissipates as each flat appears like a tiny creche, launderette and canteen in one, emphasising the never-ending labour required day in and day out to maintain the nuclear home. Unlike the advertisement for lino promising comfort and cushioning, this passage is a series of moments of debasing contact:

'Me knees — look at me filthy knees — I've been scrubbing the floor. I painted me toenails red but I forgot to wipe the dirt off me knees'

Dishing up the stewed steak, curling at the edges with gristle — cheap cut — she spills gravy over her hand and drops the dish. 'Oh fuck me — I'm going barmy scraping potatoes all morning in this poxy hole, it's fucking horrible.'

A big greasy kettle is on the stove.

The grubby eiderdown with the roses, and she bends to pick the toys up off the floor. She kneels on the lino and tries to sweep under the bed and knocks her head against the table, the lino is cool against her knees. She looks round the kitchen, the grey formica table and no more letters from Dave.<sup>103</sup>

There are instances where Joy herself becomes part of the kitchen, an injurable surface that can be scuffed and scolded, or polished and smoothed. Her carefully painted nails, which are smooth and lacquered, are overwhelmed by the other sloppy and greasy textures. Her pained exclamation, underscored by the pain of banging her head on the formica table, and the cold lino, all add to the impression of disillusionment. Everything is hard work. Indeed, this is emphasised by Joy's desire to strip all these modern trappings away. She looks through a window and sees a young couple:

The door opened and a young woman came in. She wore mules on her feet and her legs were slightly bandy in her short cotton skirt. Her long hair was tied by a bit of ribbon. She went up to him, took the baby and sat on the settee. The young man had his back to the

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>103</sup> Dunn, p. 141.

window. She could see his muscles move under the bare electric bulb. Looking through the window life seemed so easy—all you needed was a man, a baby and a couple of rooms.<sup>104</sup>

This image, in contrast to the harsh, painful surfaces in the previous passage, represents the sensual warmth of the man's skin as she sees his muscles ripple in the stripped-back lighting. This moment, which comes at the end of the novel, represents a different kind of 'window-gazing' to the gaze stimulated by the Ideal Home Exhibition. Instead of peering through the windows of model show homes filled with labour-saving devices, ultimately this moment of simple clarity can be read as a rejection of this version of modernity. This is emphasised by Dunn's own positionality. In Dunn's hands, Battersea is marked by a hybrid of old and new 'rubbish'. As Stephen Brooke argues, her move from the centre to the margins of society and the liberation that this brings is rendered in her attention to 'dirt'.<sup>105</sup> The subjectivity that is constructed is framed by Dunn's own experiences. In Brooke's view, 'slumming' is a useful interpretative framework for understanding her work. In the 2013 introduction to *Poor Cow*, Dunn wrote of the excitement and liberation that she felt when she entered this world. It was, she wrote, an 'escape from my unpeopled background to the energy of the city.' A crucial part of this was the differences in this new urban freedom, in terms of community, economy and sexuality that appealed to her: 'When I went to live in Battersea in 1959 back gardens had rabbits and pigeons, dogs wandered the streets and people sat out on doorsteps on hot summer evenings eating fish and chips.' In agreement with Brooke, it is helpful to consider the way that this is not a 'romanticised' slum necessarily but rather that Dunn was drawn to the erotic charge that it contained, as she connected the economic freedoms of this world with sexual mobility: 'There were plenty of jobs and if my friends had a row with the boss they left and by Monday would have another job. It was the same with boyfriends.' Dirt and scuffs and scrapes become liberating and a way of indexing a world that is changing: this is a hybrid modernity that finds beauty in the scratches and scrapes. This modern beauty is produced through the presence of dirt, sordidness and physical disorder. Even lino can become beautiful: in Dunn's collection of textual fragments, *Up the Junction* (1963), she describes how 'on the brown lino, amid discarded sweet wrappers and cigarette ends, the gold sleeves lay gleaming in the raw electric light.'<sup>106</sup> Thus we can take from this reading that *Poor Cow* is not a wholesale rejection of domesticity. Rather, everything in Joy's life is represented as expendable and easily marred, from the pop lyrics that she identifies with, to her plastic market purchases. Yet this only adds to Dunn's rendering of this part of the city as 'raw' but all the more

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<sup>104</sup> Dunn, p. 138

<sup>105</sup> Stephen Brooke, 'Slumming' in *Swinging London?: Class, Gender and the Post-War City in Nell Dunn's Up the Junction* (1963), *Cultural and Social History* 9.3 (2012) pp. 429-449.

<sup>106</sup> *Up the Junction*, p. 26

appealing because of its imperfections to the bourgeois gaze. At the end of her introduction Dunn reflects that:

It all ended when the sanitary inspector came round and found silverfish under the lino. The house was declared unfit for human habitation, which was of course rubbish, and demolished. Battersea became full of derelict building sites and then, thanks to the town planners, concrete high-rise prison flats.<sup>107</sup>

This reflection on this world as one that was being cleared away under false pretenses to make room for uniform, institutionalised housing, demolishing the character of Battersea, further adds to this reading.

Therefore, this chapter has demonstrated that there were key differences in form between the speculative fiction of the Smithsons' architectural proposals and the realism of the novels. Although both forms are manifestations of seeking to make a new inhabitation out of the ruins of the past and point to the future, they do so in different ways. In the two novels and the film that I have looked at, we can find three examples of 'hybrid' feminine modernities that are constructed outside of the aspirational domesticity proffered by the House of the Future. In different ways, it is migration that makes for a feeling of a kind of standstill by conservative forces that have a direct correlation with a desire to hark back to picturesque cottages and/or a kind of defensive white conservative femininity, as can be seen by Jane's restorative stay in her Aunt Addy's white Surrey cottage, Joy's full-formed daydreams, and Nell's rejection of a future in which she might get an indoor toilet at last but her daughter has a Black boyfriend. These texts are unified by their exploration of transiency. This is a theme that I will go on to explore in my next chapter, but in a very different context. In Chapter 2, I consider positively coded forms of transiency to consider how these provided a model for new kinds of formal experimentation. Having considered some of the aspects of inhabiting spaces that do not fit to you, the next chapter will continue thinking about how fittedness and 'fitting in' to society interact in examples of restless and mobile domesticities.

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<sup>107</sup> *Poor Cow*, p. xii.

## Chapter 2: Play

The representations of home analysed in the previous chapter were characterised by confinement and a lack of choice. Different characters ‘made do’ with the materials that were to hand as they forged modern identities through the different ways that they inhabited space. The chapter considered some of the ways that the literal transiency of housing poverty and migrant intersected with the visions of aspirational home ownership that were on display at the Ideal Home Exhibition. The kinds of marginal, transient lives that were being led in boarding and lodging houses present a messier picture of postwar Britain than the glossy promises of affluence. In this chapter, I broaden the scope of this idea outwards from the mostly London-based literature and film that has been explored thus far. Some of the most damning critiques of suburban modernity were being made in work by the Angry Young Men, Kitchen Sink dramas, and in British New Wave cinema. The strands of documentary realism that thread through a diverse range of works can be characterised as an attention to the ‘authentic’, a term whose slippery and contested meaning will itself be examined in the course of this chapter. In a number of these texts, women and ‘the home’ are represented as an obstacle to the flourishing of the male characters: the threat of being ‘trapped’ looms large. Yet the misogyny that underpins these fears homogenises these settings and obscures the ways that normative domesticity was being experienced as something unstable for women, too.

This chapter comprises of two parts, organised around the theme of ‘play’. I first read Keith Waterhouse’s *Billy Liar* (1959) as a book that encapsulates the imbrication of misogyny and domesticity in the set of texts under discussion.<sup>1</sup> Billy Fisher is a nineteen-year old compulsive fantasist who ‘plays house’ with his three girlfriends, who each represent a different version of a future household for him. Although Billy’s fiancées (to whom he is engaged simultaneously) Rita and Barbara ‘The Witch’ represent a pessimistic model of heterosexuality, doomed to repeat itself (as is emphasised by their imaginary children ‘little Barbara and little Billy’), the character of Liz gestures towards a more restless image of domesticity. While Billy might be seen to be constantly ‘playing’ in various ways, from making up stories to turning his life into fodder for his comedy scripts, his style of play is presented as childish in comparison to Liz’s ludic approach to relationships. The safe and transient Liz is a foil to his compulsive stuckness. Thus I use this as a starting point for considering some of the ways that ideas of free play were seen as an important part of the postwar reconstruction of the domestic.

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Waterhouse, *Billy Liar* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1980).

Therefore, in the second part of this chapter, I will be turning to the Smithsons to provide a new perspective on Brutalism: one that is often left out of accounts of building in the 1950s and 1960s. For the Smithsons, *play* became an important idea for thinking about how spaces could be inhabited. As I will go on to show, they posited that the family unit was a structure that encouraged creativity: akin to an architectural collective. This was an idea that was very much of its time and was informed by discussions and debates taking place about the child as a subject. This chapter, therefore, illuminates some of the ways that Brutalism was invested in how to design a modern family environment.

This will in turn add further nuance to the comparisons that are often made between the ‘Angries’ and New Brutalist architecture. Paula Derdiger, for instance, has argued that an excessive emphasis on the parallels between them has failed to account for the ‘inclusive social vision, utopian current, and ethical commitment underwriting New Brutalism as a project – however unrealised the utopia finally remained.’<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there is an intuitive parallel between the raw, basic building materials of New Brutalist buildings and the stripped down style and unfiltered content of kitchen sink realism.

Like Brutalist forms, they offered a ‘direct expression of a way of life’, putting the embodied realities of urban working class life on the stage: confronting middle-class audiences with explicit scenes of drinking, fighting, sex and abortion. Owen Hatherley, for instance, describes The New Brutalists as ‘an architectural analogue to the ‘angry young men’, known to be of ‘redbrick extraction’ and a product of class mobility: only with their abstraction cancelling out the blokeish peevy of their literary contemporaries.’<sup>3</sup> Derdiger adds important nuance to this discussion by reading Colin MacInnes’ *Absolute Beginners* (1959) alongside the work of the Smithsons. She argues that Brutalism promoted a revolutionary kind of mobility within the British built environment that was attuned to the desire for human scale and connection. This humanist interest in the complex networks and social structures of a new world can also be found in MacInnes’ representation of a rapidly mobile, highly changing city.<sup>4</sup> However, this chapter takes a different approach to expanding our understandings of New Brutalism by showing that, in fact, there *were* similarities between the Smithsons’ work and that of the ‘Angries’ or angry-adjacent social realism: they just are not the ones that have been drawn out so far. Instead, this reading offers a fresh perspective that, in fact, both were deeply invested in the normative family unit and its location. Furthermore, they were both critical of the overreach of the welfare state, even though they shared a fundamental belief that people deserved better. They both reacted against the suburban estate and the vision of family life that it promoted. However, as we shall

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 3 ‘Mobile Housing: Realizing Movement in 1950s City Fiction’, pp. 85-118. p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> *Militant Modernism*, p. 32

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

see, their approaches are very different. Alison and Peter Smithson used their own family as a kind of collaborative experiment in modern living: ideas that they put down in their ‘paper architecture’ – by which I mean their writings, their plans, their media representations of their buildings, and their books. This reading will open up a rich seam of alternative texts, cultural objects, and architectural forms – children’s literature, caravans, holiday houses – that we do not tend to associate with Brutalism, but that will enrich our understanding of the domestic in this period.

## Part I. Slapstick Comedy and the Suburban Housewife

The glossy domesticity on display at the Ideal Home Exhibition was presented in earnest, but it soon became an object of parody. Its supposedly utopian reliance on labour-saving technology lent itself lends itself to slapstick comedy, as we see in a key scene in the 1961 *Carry On* film *Carry On Regardless*.<sup>5</sup> The film opens in a Labour Exchange office: there are no ‘interesting’ jobs available until the boss of a newly established temping agency, ‘Helping Hands Ltd’, gets in touch looking to recruit an entire team of ‘hands’. The culmination of this is when the entire team are hired to work as demonstrators at the Ideal Home Exhibition. However, all the gadgets misfire, to the entertainment of the crowds and the audience. This scene, domestic gadgets escape from their intended use and become objects of play, and I argue that this encapsulates a real ambivalence towards the feminised modernity that the Exhibition promoted. Through its exaggeration, it draws attention to a debate about its false promises as being aesthetically corrosive. The gimmicks – the bed that, using a remote control, can serve the user a rotisserie chicken, or a cup of tea, or tuck them in – are designed to abbreviate labour and effort but are exposed. They should be increasing productivity by reducing human labour through technological advancement but these are translated into a signal of aesthetic impoverishment – of middlebrow, feminised taste – making the perfect punchline.

As Sianne Ngai has argued in a different context, the ‘gimmick’ irritates because it abbreviates work and time.<sup>6</sup> This has particular significance in a moment where women’s roles and the politics of family life were being renegotiated: coalescing around conversations about the role of motherhood and

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<sup>5</sup> *Carry On Regardless* (dir. Gerald Thomas) 1961; As Christine Geraghty and Sarah Street have argued, the Ealing comedies and the *Carry On* franchise of the 1950s derive their impetus from fears about the overreach of state power and mistrust of bureaucratic structures: a wide range of institutions are subverted, even if the status quo is reasserted at the same time. Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the ‘New Look’* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000); Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2020).

work, debating how women should be occupying their time.<sup>7</sup> This was another anxiety that stretched back into the Ideal Home Exhibition's earlier history. This was a set of questions that played out again and again, shaping debates about high, low and middlebrow culture, 'modernity versus modernism,' and was articulated by second-wave feminists such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).<sup>8</sup> Hovering in the background of 'labour-saving' is a suspicion towards the substitute, towards the approximate or the generic: the household becomes a series of stand-ins. The 'price' of saving time is that the household is condensed down into metonymical representation. The lowbrow jokes and congealed eroticism of *Carry On* comedy might themselves be read as a kind of cinematic gimmick, and the labour-saving practice of churning out near-identical characters and plots in every iteration of the franchise intersects revealingly with the gender politics of the films. The link between gimmickry and a particular kind of feminised, non-serious labour was drawn as early as 1933, when L.C. Knights wrote in 'Notes on Comedy' making a complaint about literary criticism, directly invoking domestic appliances (the vacuum cleaner, dishwasher, coffeemaker) as a means to stir contempt:

Labour-saving devices are common in criticism. Like the goods advertised in women's journals they do the work, or appear to do it, leaving the mind for more narcotic forms of enjoyment. Generalisations and formulae are devices of this kind.<sup>9</sup>

These literary clichés are suspicious because of their association with machines that are linked to women. This proximity is enough, it does not matter whether they do or do not actually save labour, they symbolise (from this perspective) something cheapened and vacuous. Gimmicks and gadgets such as these are something to be resisted: it is an acknowledgement that might ensnare people because they are appealing, but they are not worth it. This scene from *Carry on Regardless* gives a snapshot of some of the latest iterations of these inventions, but there are too many more to list as they were such an integral feature of the Exhibition. To give a flavour of them: British Pathé archival footage shot at the 1959 Exhibition demonstrates a roll-up ladder (the Bentall Easyroll), a tabletop Rotisserie Electric Cooker; later in 1962 demonstrators model a 'Whirl-O-Wash' portable washing machine and a 'Lissomrest' vibrating bench for reducing body fat.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> See Deborah Sugg Ryan, *Ideal Homes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020) particularly her chapter 'Modernisms: 'good design' and 'bad design' pp. 82-134. See also Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> L.C. Knights, 'Notes on Comedy,' *Scrutiny* 1 (March 1933): 356-67, p. 356.

<sup>10</sup> British Pathé newsreels archive. Available online

<<https://www.britishpathe.com/search/query/ideal+home+exhibition>>.

Fig. 2.1 The Bed of the Century Malfunctions, *Carry On Regardless* (1961)



This is also the case in the politics of *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (first written by Ted Willis as a play and adapted by J. Lee Thompson for film in 1957). In this film Jim and Amy Preston's marriage is threatened by Jim's affair with the young and efficient Georgie. It culminates in an impassioned speech at the end of the film where Amy accuses Georgie of being too efficient: 'you're so calm, cool – Jimbo always said how efficient you were. You look at me and you feel so efficient.' Georgie has even efficiently arranged for Jim to leave Amy on the weekend, to which Amy replies, 'Of course, of course, it's all organised, like borrowing a cup of sugar! You walk into someone's house and you say 'excuse me, would it be alright if I take your husband on the weekend? Will that be convenient? You're like a fish, I look at you and see a fish: cold and unfeeling.' Amy herself is slovenly, but she dreams about winning a fashion competition and being an ideal housewife. She is described in Willis' script as 'thirty-five to forty, a genial, good-natured, untidy slummock. Her clothes, her hair, her manner - all suggest that she doesn't bother about things. For all this, she has a sympathetic personality: one takes to her at once'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the narrative repairs their marriage. Lynda Nead, in her reading of the film, speculates what would have happened if they had decided to start marriage counselling (either provided by the National Marriage Guidance Council established in 1946, or the Family Discussion Bureau founded in 1948, or the Tavistock Clinic's Marital Unit which was set up in 1949): probably these institutions would nudge her towards visiting the hairdresser's more often and abandoning her shabby dressing gown, which was a sign she had 'opted out of modern femininity, enveloped in its loose, unstructured threads'.<sup>12</sup> Jim would be encouraged to see his fantasy projection of an ideal wife and be more accepting of the loveable, affable Amy. In this version of normativity, she is shown to be more desirable than the unsettlingly composed, efficient Georgie.

The slapstick comedy of the misfiring gadgets, exposing them as dually appealing and unappealing through their mechanicalness and genericness helps to understand the comedy of Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* (1959). *Carry On Regardless* captures the chaotic inverse of these aspirations and some of the anxieties they symbolise. *Billy Liar* also satirises the home-making dreams epitomised by the image of the young couple setting up home. Billy's three different attempts at 'playing house' show how he is working through different potentials in which he shuttles between his two fiancées Rita and Barbara. Rita is represented as a kind of mechanistic automaton, living out a system of desires robotically. Rita works at Stradhoughton's former milk bar: 'The Kit-Kat was now a coffee bar, or thought it was.'<sup>13</sup> A 'perspex-covered menu' advertises 'onion soup that did not exist' and the 'stippled walls, although

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<sup>11</sup> Ted Willis, *Woman in a Dressing Gown and Other Television Plays* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1959), pp. 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> Nead, p. 336.

<sup>13</sup> Waterhouse, p. 44.

redecorated, remained straight milk bar.’<sup>14</sup> Rita’s veneer of modernity is also exposed as false as she ‘could have transmogrified the Great Northern Hotel itself into a steamy milk bar with one wipe of her tea-cloth.’<sup>15</sup> Her body is turned into suburban kitchen gadgetry that advertises false promises as her ‘bosom’ is ‘itself a cliché, like a plaster relief given away by the women’s magazines.’<sup>16</sup> She is rendered as a gadget that is not even worth paying for: coming closer to the giveaways that were written about as ‘free samples’, a novelty that should be cheerfully resisted.<sup>17</sup> Billy invites her round to meet his parents as ‘a kind of free coupon along with the proposal.’<sup>18</sup> The connection between women, bombastic advertising language and labour-saving devices is further brought out here through her use of language:

Everybody I knew spoke in clichés, but Rita spoke as though she got her words out of a slot machine, while sentences ready-packed in a disposable tinfoil wrapper. There was so little meaning left in anything she actually said; her rough few phrases had been so worn through constant use that she now relied not on words but on the voice itself.<sup>19</sup>

Everything about her becomes a misfiring labour-saving device used in service of Billy’s entertainment. Furthermore, just as in this reading the Ideal Home Exhibition and the version of domesticity that it promotes is exposed as being a shallow ‘front’ for domestic drudgery, Billy imagines that she will transform into his other fiancée Barbara after marriage:

He could see the picture of marriage forming in her mind, the white wedding, the drawers crammed full of blankets, the terrace house with the linoleum squares, the seagrass stools, and the novel horseshoe companion set in satin brass.<sup>20</sup>

Billy’s conversations with Barbara round out this image of future domesticity. Fixedness and a lack of adaptability underpins his descriptions of her, too: she prematurely lives out another readymade package of desires. This manifests in Waterhouse’s emphasis on her ‘frigidity’ (Billy is constantly trying to slip her ‘Passion Pills’): ‘she is ‘completely sexless’, ‘large, clean and, as I knew to my cost, wholesome.’<sup>21</sup> Billy and Barbara’s conversations are animated by planning what their future married life will be like in their ‘thatched cottage in the middle of some unspecified field in Devon’, with ‘two

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> In 1954 Enid Marx wrote ‘as always in this huge Exhibition, it is the little gadgets that most delight and that we all come away with; the golden cloth for scouring saucepans without broken fingernails, the automatic needle threader [...] the nippers for resealing the half-empty ginger beer bottle and a host of other pieces of ingenuity far too numerous even to mention.’ *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts*, Vol. 102, No. 4921 (19th March 1954), pp. 314-315: p. 315.

<sup>18</sup> Waterhouse, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

children, little Barbara and little Billy.’<sup>22</sup> This vision of coupledness resonates with some of the dominant discourses around setting up home: official sources addressed the fictional ‘Bill and Betty who have just returned from their honeymoon’ or window-gazers Bill and Muriel, thinking ahead to a family of their own.<sup>23</sup> Barbara tells Billy, ‘I’ve seen the most marvelous material to make curtains for our cottage. Honestly, you’ll love it.’<sup>24</sup> Much discussion is given to whether the turquoise fabric with wine-glass-like squiggles will go with the yellow carpet or the grey rugs in the ‘kiddies’ room:

The yellow carpet and grey rugs we had seen in a furniture-shop window on one of the interminable expeditions round Stradhoughton that the Witch sometimes dragged me on. They had all long ago been sold, but many had become part of the picture of the cottage, along with the Windsor chairs, the kettle singing on the hob, the bloody cat, and also the crinoline ladies from my bedroom wall at home.<sup>25</sup>

The question of Billy’s complicity in these fantasies is raised by the odd inclusion of the crinoline ladies from his bedroom wall and the extent to which he desires a home that is taken care of and maintained by first his nagging mother (who also speaks in ‘stock phrases’ that Billy calls ‘Motherisms’) and then his wife.<sup>26</sup> In fact, his mum decorated his bedroom – he lies ‘under pale gold eiderdown, staring up at the crinoline ladies craftily fashioned out of silver paper and framed in passe-partout (they would be coming down for a start).’<sup>27</sup> In this way, *Billy Liar* fits in with themes that spanned different but often overlapping strands of social realism. Scholars such as Peter Kalliney and Gregory Salter have challenged the politics of the visions of authenticity that they present, arguing that white heterosexual masculinity was a fragile construct that was deeply invested in domesticity but suspicious of the vision of welfare state citizenship embodied by the material culture of the suburban female consumer.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Jimmy in *Look Back in Anger* criticises women for constantly ‘slamming their doors, stamping their high heels, banging their irons and saucepans – the eternal flaming racket of the female.’<sup>29</sup> His is a version of heterosexuality that staged as a battle of the sexes: he complains that Alison is too good at adapting to circumstances ‘If she were to wake up in paradise—after the first five minutes she’d have got used to it.’<sup>30</sup> Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and*

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<sup>22</sup> Waterhouse, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Bill and Betty were the archetypal fictional couple of an exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery sponsored by Oxford House Furniture in 1952 which gave advice on shopping for furniture; an article in *Woman* in 1959 addressed ‘Bill and Muriel’ with the same moral line. The commercial images depict couples working together on decorating projects: the rising popularity of DIY as a hobby was promoted as a way for both partners to participate in the domestic. (See ‘Make Do and Mend’ in MacDonal and Porter).

<sup>24</sup> Waterhouse, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> See Kalliney and Salter.

<sup>29</sup> John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (London: Faber, 2018), p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

*Sunday Morning* also remakes his masculinity by rejecting and inhabiting the role of husband and breadwinner. Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (1960) and John Braine's *A Room at the Top* (1957) also stage the drama of trying to find a suitable location for a newly married couple. Billy exhibits a similar ambivalence towards the pace of change, both attracted and repelled: 'at times, in the right mood, I could get quite enthusiastic over this rural image, and it had even figured in my No. 1. Thinking before now.'<sup>31</sup> Yet by transforming the angst and anger attached to these themes into play and comedy, *Billy Liar* leaves an opening for a kind of optimism, at least for Liz.

Billy's ironising of clichés can be taken as a version of an awkward attempt to inhabit a changing world as the dominant pictures of domesticity exemplified by the Ideal Home Exhibition reverberated in other more provincial parts of the country. In *Billy Liar* we can observe the 'State of the Nation' debates from a suburban perspective. Billy's misogyny epitomises the discourse about the erosion of organic Northern communities by the rise of 'subtopia'.<sup>32</sup> This term comes from Ian Nairn's influential essay 'Outrage' for *Architectural Review* in 1955. In summary, he argued that 'Places are different: Subtopia is the annihilation of the difference by attempting to make one type of scenery standard for town, suburb, countryside and wild.'<sup>33</sup> The representation of provincial towns as lifeless shrines to uniformity, inflexibility and mass production is also perpetuated by Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, where Hoggart voices his fears that Britain was moving 'towards the creation of an Americanised mass culture; that the remnants of what was at least in parts an urban culture 'of the people' are beyond destroyed; and that the new mass culture in some ways less healthy than the often crude culture it is replacing.'<sup>34</sup> Billy's landscape of 'Stradhoughton' is transformed into a landscape that looks like it could be bought 'off the rack'. The hills are likened to 'lush, tropical green velvet that looked as though you could buy it by the yard at Marks and Spencers.'<sup>35</sup> This has a similar meaning to Philip Larkin's poem 'The Large Cool Store' (1961) which laments the off-the-rack synthetic garments that are finished by machines and not hands, for sale at M&S; similarly in his 'The Whitsun Weddings' (1961) he notes 'the nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes/the lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that/Marked the girls unreally from the rest.'<sup>36</sup> These girls are dressed as 'parodies of fashion' – and we can locate, in the trimmings of the plush velvet green knoll a sense of duplicity. The

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<sup>31</sup> Waterhouse, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> For a fuller account of Northern identity, see Nick Bentley's chapter 'Northern Yobs: Representations of Youth in 1950s Writing: Hoggart, Sillitoe and Waterhouse' in Katharine Cockin, *The Literary North* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 125-144.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Nairn, 'Outrage', *Architectural Review*, June 1955.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p. 24.

<sup>35</sup> Waterhouse, p. 146.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Larkin, 'The Whitsun Weddings', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), pp. 80-83; 'The Large Cool Store', p. 89.

geography of the town is populated by these suspicious materials: also turned gimmicky ‘along Market Street, where the new glass-tinted shop spilled out their sagging lengths of plywood and linoleum, there were still the old-fashioned stalls, lining the gutter with small rotten apples and purple tissue paper.’<sup>37</sup>

This extends into Billy’s workplace. Billy’s boss, Young Shadrack, is designing a ‘perspex coffin’: an object of dark comedy that stands in for the changing architectural social and architectural landscape of Stradhoughton, just as the company office has been renovated so that it now looks like ‘a chip shop on a suburban council estate’:

‘Y’see, people don’t realise. It’s all clean lines nowadays. All these frills and fancies are going out. It’s all old.’

‘Hm,’ I said.

‘Same as I tell Councillor Duxbury. You’ve got to move with the times. It’s no use living in one style and dying in another. It’s anarchism.’

‘Anachronism’.<sup>38</sup>

What is happening in the arena of modernist housing and good design — ‘all clean lines’ — is made morbidly ridiculous when it is applied to a coffin. Indeed, this sense of displacement provides the backdrop for Billy’s opportunity to leave Stradhoughton. Billy’s opportunity to go to London and take up a position as an assistant to his hero, the comedian Danny Boon, is self-sabotaged when he deliberately misses his train. In the film adaptation, this is under the pretences of needing to get milk for the journey. He stands on the platform clutching two cartons of milk to his chest — an image which feels laden with maternal symbolism. He passes up the tangible opportunity to leave Stradhoughton behind, choosing to stay in this feminised landscape and world of mothers and girlfriends. Fixed in place, he inhabits the landscape by working it up into ‘bits’: playing with the parochial symbolic and linguistic network it offers by telling stories and jokes, and making false promises, but leaves it ultimately untouched. Like the slapstick humour of the *Carry On* films, comedy and humour emerges from being rigid and fixed: from an anxiety about *failing* to adapt.

Billy’s sometimes girlfriend Liz represents an alternative template for femininity and non-domesticity. Unlike Billy, she leaves whenever she likes. She does not get close enough to situations to ‘inhabit’ them: safeness and transiency are bracketed together. She is his fixed centre and a voice of common

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<sup>37</sup> Waterhouse, p. 24; The Perspex coffin as the target of satire shows how much plastic had been aesthetically cheapened after the War. In E.G. Couzens and V. E. Yarsley’s 1941 chemistry text *Plastics* they write excitedly about the life of a ‘Plastic Man’, who lives in a bright shining world of plastics and at the end of his life he ‘wears a denture with silent plastic teeth and spectacles with plastic lenses... until at last he sinks into his grave in a hygienically enclosed plastic coffin.’ *Plastics* (London: Penguin, 1945), p. 152.

<sup>38</sup> Waterhouse p. 25; p. 40.

sense but she is also someone who is able to up and go. She is an equal match for his language games. She is steady and kind, with even her unconventionally attractive, scruffy appearance reassuringly unchanging: ‘she was wearing the same old things, the green suede jacket and the crumpled black skirt. But the crisp white blouse went well with her round, shiny face, the mousy hair, and the eyes that laughed out loud.’<sup>39</sup> The clues that her mobility is upwards are in the single reference to her ‘plummy and comfortable’ voice and that she is upstairs in X-L Disc Bar listening to classical music.<sup>40</sup> She provides a reversal of the discourses about women that are common across ‘Angry Young Men’ narratives where women are presented as obstacles to the male protagonist flourishing. She does not want to become part of this landscape (and arguably fixed by the male gaze), becoming ‘part of the scenery’ or ‘part of the furniture’, immovable and fixed in place:

Every so often I just want to go away. It’s not you Billy, I want to be here with you. It’s the town. It’s the people we know. I don’t like knowing everybody, or becoming a part of things.<sup>41</sup>

The appeal of Liz provides our starting place for exploring how transiency becomes linked in interesting ways to domesticity in postwar literature and architectural discourses. For Billy, Liz represents a kind of restless domesticity: a homeliness that has nothing to do with all the ‘stuff’ of the ideal suburban home: ‘I was happy to be with her; it was like being in a refuge, her beaming, comfortable presence protecting me from the others.’<sup>42</sup> Part two of this chapter takes this idea and moves outwards to consider different forms of ‘safe and transient’: to this idea writ large. I will demonstrate through an analysis of different kinds of positively coded transiency some of the other formal outlets that these ideas found. To do so, I will think about the inverse of this ‘anxious comedy’: serious play and its place in postwar culture. I will turn to different styles of play to illuminate different kinds of ‘dwelling’ and inhabitation that are often overlooked in discussions of post-war building and to break down these dichotomies between different ‘types’ of women: those who reject the domestic and those who embrace it.

## Part II

The previous section explored some of the anxieties attached to setting up a household and how the comedy – which seems like playfulness – of *Billy Liar* belies a regressive desire for stability. This section looks at other kinds of play and their relationship to modernity before turning to the Smithsons’ interpretation of these ideas. ‘Play’ was a serious endeavour in the postwar period. The

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<sup>39</sup> Waterhouse, p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

meaning of childhood was being negotiated. As Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness* (1950) demonstrates, the 'wrong' kind of play has bad consequences for society.<sup>43</sup> Society has 'failed' to 'civilise' seventeen-year-old Slade art school student Barbary. Her playground is the blitzed ruins of London where she makes a surrogate home alongside spivs and other 'delinquent' characters, feeling more at home on the fringes of society in this ruinous habitat than anywhere else in the austere, respectable grey city: 'here its cliffs and chasms seemed to say, is your home; here you belong; you *maquis* that lies about the margins of the wrecked world, and here your feet are set; here you find the irredeemable barbarism that comes up from the depth of the earth, and that you have known elsewhere.'<sup>44</sup> Overtaken by lush green nature, these ruins act as a secret hideout evacuated of morality. Dwelling in this ruinscape, Barbary finds freedom:

Barbary had money in her purse; they lived well and went to a cinema in the evening. They spent the afternoon in the ruins; Barbary did a painting of Addle Street and the jungle that grew where Brewers' Hall had stood; then she and Raoul redecorated the walls of their room in Somerset Chambers, which some *sales types* had scribbled over with most of the words that printers may not set.<sup>45</sup>

This image of a scruffy, overgrown child 'looking like a ragamuffin' running around London, 'borrowing' bicycles, listening to jazz on stolen radios, and using the fractured landscape as her canvas encapsulates some of the concerns about the trauma of the Second World War on children's maturation.<sup>46</sup> As Beryl Pong argues, the novel fashions together a Bildungsroman that departs from its generic blueprint to question society's 'formation' or 'development' of its youth.<sup>47</sup> Barbary is presented as being stunted caught somewhere between almost-adulthood and perpetual childishness: a potential lover notices that she has no interest in sex, for instance: 'her aloof childish incomprehension cooled his blood. He supposed her very backward, since she failed to see the most obvious connection in the world.'<sup>48</sup> Her games, as Leo Mellor writes, are quasi-militaristic guerrilla warfare, the fallout of the violence of war.<sup>49</sup> Yet the ruins are also presented as the only place where this makeshift homeliness can find a place as Barbary and Raoul collect eggs they find in a hen's nest in St Olave's churchyard to try and cook them for dinner, drink beers, play draughts and read aloud. 'It would be nice,' said Barbary, 'to see a picture of all this as it was - all houses and offices and shops

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<sup>43</sup> Rose Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness* (London: Virago, 2018).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>47</sup> Beryl Pong, 'The Archaeology of Postwar Childhood in Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness*' *Journal of Modern Literature* (2014) 37.2. pp. 92-110.

<sup>48</sup> Macaulay, p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Leo Mellor, 'The New London Jungle', *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 166-202.

and streets. Mavis says it was much better then. But I don't know. I think I like it better like this. One belongs more.<sup>50</sup> Even their petty theft has a humorous naivety and lawlessness about it as Raoul puts together a shopping list for Barbary to acquire – but this includes Gruyere cheese, or, if there is none 'Camembert, well matured. That is from the food department. From others I will have a corkscrew-knife, a red scarf, and a flute.'<sup>51</sup> Barbary steals a yellow scarf decorated with black kittens for herself, which also seems to emphasise the superfluousness of this shoplifting expedition: she steals not to make money through her black market connections but because she can.<sup>52</sup> This kind of lawless play, shot through with the percolating and not-yet-known traumas of war, was precisely the kind that the new institutions of the postwar welfare state sought to redirect into something positive.

The welfare state's attitudes to child welfare and education arose, I argue, from a new model of subjectivity which had developed in response to the War and had arisen directly from the crisis that was the evacuation of more than a million cities ahead of the Blitz. These plans had treated children as objects to be moved by bureaucratic fiat. They did not anticipate the problems that would be caused by the separation of children from their families and their resettlement in their temporary foster homes, which resulted in many children returning to their home cities before the Blitz began. Following this, the government developed strategies for understanding the emotional difficulties of the participants and worked with psychologists and social workers such as Melanie Klein and John Bowlby to gather and analyse data as it was being lived.<sup>53</sup> Childhood became an intensely discussed conceptual space for moulding the miniature model citizens of tomorrow. In concert with new models of governance, institutions were set up to help the family, particularly the mother, to provide the emotional environment needed to nurture the development of a healthy, successful and adjusted citizen. Power would be exerted not through compulsion but by 'inciting, inducing, seducing' subjects to act in a certain way by mobilising their capacity for agency and desire for autonomy. They attempted this by studying emotions and desires with the aim that responsible and productive behaviours would result from will and through consent. For this to work, subjects needed to internalise values as their own. One of the direct responses to the strange and unsettling modernity of the bombsites was to co-opt them in service of a healthy citizen.<sup>54</sup> The adventure playground emerged as a tangible way to intervene (in a hands off way) in these spaces: a way of restoring morality to this landscape by governing through fun. The first adventure playground in Camberwell was associated

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<sup>50</sup> Macaulay, p. 171.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>53</sup> See Roy Kozlovsky *The Architectures of Childhood: Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Postwar England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), particularly Introduction for an overview of the postwar model of power and the government of children; see also, B.S. Johnson (ed.), *The Evacuees* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1968).

<sup>54</sup> Kozlovsky, Chapter 2, 'Adventure Playgrounds; Play on Display', pp. 47-92.

with the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham. This playground contrasted with the four S based playground (Swing, Seesaw, Sandbox and Slide). Children were given an empty space, construction tools and waste material. This model emphasised the importance of the *ludic* in society and the pleasure of making and destroying things, engaging the imagination rather than playing in a fixed and repetitive way with limited play equipment.<sup>55</sup> The adventure playground:

Demonstrated a “dormant” potential for a free society that is based on unforced, spontaneous cooperation, individual growth, and is flexible in adapting to ever changing desires and needs. The parallels between the two institutions suggest that the techniques initiated at Peckham for organising everyday activities in a manner that incites subjects to actively pursue healthy living, while rendering their interiority observable and governable to experts, were most readily transferred to the postwar management of children’s play, in the form of the adventure playground.<sup>56</sup>

The concept could even be scaled up for adults, anticipating Cedric Price’s unrealised ‘Fun Palace’ from 1961 which sought to create an interactive, participatory social environment that could be modified to match the changing needs of a ludic society. Conceptualised as a ‘laboratory of fun’ and a ‘university of the streets’ it was presented as an adventure playground for adults where visitors could ‘learn how to handle tools, paint, babies, machinery, or just listen to your favourite tune.’<sup>57</sup> Common to both was the idea that the imagination should be engaged, taking up Walter Benjamin’s observation that ‘real, living play’ resides in the ‘playing’, not the plaything.<sup>58</sup> Roy Kozlovsky makes an important case that the ensuing adventure playgrounds that were set up should be looked at heterogeneously and Krista Cowman demonstrates how these spaces reproduced traditional gender norms.<sup>59</sup> However, the *shift* in attitude towards play as something that should be encouraged as healthy that the adventure playgrounds exemplify forms part of the context of the ‘social modernism’ of the period.<sup>60</sup>

‘Social modernism’, as Ben Highmore terms it, was modernism at its most ambitious and messiest as it was invested in the everyday life of the ‘healthy human’. As well as the Pioneer Health Centre and

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<sup>55</sup> Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1949) exemplifies the humanist investment in play as an important concept. He argued that Fascism and Capitalism are symptoms of the decay of the play principle and made a case that it should be restored as a civilising power to counter the destructiveness and intolerance he saw in modern culture.

<sup>56</sup> Kozlovsky, p. 48.

<sup>57</sup> Stanley Matthews, ‘The Fun Palace as Virtual Architecture: Cedric Price and the Practices of Indeterminacy’ *Journal of Architectural Education* (2006) 59.3 pp. 39-48. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40480644>>.

<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted in Kozlovsky, p. 49.

<sup>59</sup> Krista Cowman, ‘The Atmosphere is Permissive and Free’ The Gendering of Activism in the British Adventure Playgrounds Movement, ca. 1948-70’, *Journal of Social History*, Volume 53, Issue 1 (2019), pp. 218-241.

<sup>60</sup> Ben Highmore, ‘Hopscotch modernism: on everyday life and the blurring of art and social science’, *Modernist Cultures* (2006), 2.1. pp. 70-79.

its associated play projects, the Mass-Observation movement is a key example of this. ‘Social modernism’ is a useful critical optic which can also be applied, too, to the Smithsons’ work. They incorporated a series of photographs taken by Nigel Henderson around the blitzed area of East London, where they were living at the time, into the ‘Urban Reidentification’ grid that they presented at the *Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne* [CIAM] 9 in 1953. It was amidst the bombsites and ruins that the Smithsons worked out one of the biggest problems for buildings. They were committed to the everyday ‘habitat’ of the human but they felt that everyday life was more oriented towards the past than the future. They needed to strategise how to build for everyday life of the future. They saw children’s play and their street games as a way of navigating this intensely unsettled historical moment where time and space had been turned inside out and the past blasted into the present:

The ‘life-of-the-streets’ in these pictures is a survival from an earlier culture - and a subsistence culture at that. But we have not yet discovered an equivalent to the street form for the present day. All we know is that the street has been invalidated by the motor car, rising standards of living and changing values. Any revival is historicism. In the uninhibited organisation of the children’s games we are seeing a valid pattern, and in this is an indication of a freer sort of organisation.<sup>61</sup>

The children’s games that are played on the street provide a model for how the past might be carried into the future in a way that is not nostalgic or historicist but that is reinvented for the present. The hopscotch drawn out in chalk provides one such example of how meanings change through repeated use. As Roger Caillois wrote in 1958:

In antiquity, hopscotch was a labyrinth in which one pushed a stone - i.e. the soul - toward the exit. With Christianity, the design became elongated and simplified, reproducing the layout of a basilica. The problem of moving the stone became to help the soul attain heaven, paradise, halo, or glory, coinciding with the high altar of the church, and schematically represented on the ground by a series of rectangles.<sup>62</sup>

The way that the game alters its meaning slowly through time and still retains a place in the secular canon of children’s games, positions the ‘everyday’ as both improvised and rule-bound, spontaneous and inherited, playful and ritualistic. Furthermore, they need a habitat to facilitate them. In the case of the street, this is figured as a sheltered space of care and community, safety and monitoring but not policing. This is a model of play that does not take place in a formalised playground and that is not intervened in: the kind of play that should flourish in the bombsite-turned-adventure playground.

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<sup>61</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson, *Urban Structuring* (London: Studio Vista, 1967), p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 82 - originally published in France in 1958.



Fig. 2.2 Nigel Henderson, *Chisenhale Road*, 1951, Tate Archives

The Smithsons took this model and applied it to the family unit and the question of how to find a home in a ruinous landscape. They viewed family life as a form of collaboration akin to the kinds of experimentation that they were discussing in an architectural context with Team 10. They saw themselves as modelling themselves on Le Corbusier, if not architecturally, then in their habit of publishing extensively; he seemed to share their maxim that a book is like a small building. However, they noted that he limited himself to architecture and wrote no books on cooking, or childcare or childrearing.<sup>63</sup> However, they recognised that this was the messy ‘stuff’ of everyday life that Le Corbusier had sought to banish from the representations of his work. By contrast, the Smithsons proposed a new way of living that did not just accept the free-spirited, messy child, but was modelled around it. Playing and play was an important mode of ‘inhabitation’ which elided the distinction between the street and the domestic interior: as much about the ‘journey’ – the making and remaking – as the destination. Furthermore, ‘paper architecture’ (as opposed to their built projects) was the perfect place for this kind of playing.

What follows is an analysis of different key examples that demonstrate the centrality of play to the Smithsons’ practice. Work and play existed for them in a continuum. This is emphasised in their publication *The Tram Rats*. This was a bedtime story put down on paper that the Smithsons later presented at *Art Net*.<sup>64</sup> It was a collaborative effort between the family. Their son Simon Smithson drew the trams; Alison put together the photomontage collages showing ‘where the tram went’ and both Alison and Peter contributed ‘ratrel’ verse. The book becomes a way of digesting a feel for an industrial past that since disappeared (this was a storybook for the sixties child who had no experience of them) through the playful language of sing-song nonsense verse. ‘Ratrel’, a pun on doggerel makes a statement about the place of trivial, inconsequential fun passed down through history from the Middle Ages. The text begins ‘there were town rats, country rats, brown rats, and water rats. And not so long ago/Tram Rats as well.’ The rats sneak around the city: it arguably has a didactic element teaching children to pay attention to the overlooked debris of the everyday in the ‘stuffings’ and the ‘slattings’. But it also has the irreverent fun of an inside joke turned outwards - a playful blend of the intimate and the open which is echoed in their architectural designs.

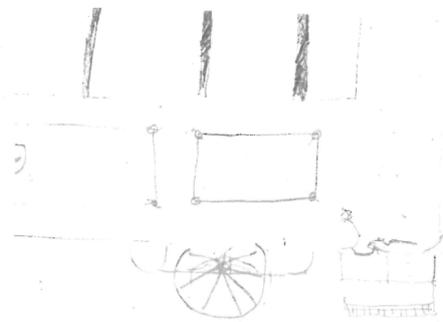
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<sup>63</sup> As quoted in M. Christine Boyer *Not Quite Architecture: Writing Around Alison and Peter Smithson* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017), p. 373.

<sup>64</sup> *Tram Rats* (n.d.) but Simon Smithson contributed to it when he was a child in the sixties.

THE TRAM RATS :  
 THERE ARE TOWN RATS AND COUNTRY RATS  
 AND BROWN RATS AND WATER RATS  
 AND NOT SO VERY LONG AGO  
 TRAM RATS AS WELL  
 Destination:  
 Tram indicator set at SPECIAL  
 Why the bustle, all the fussle?  
 What's the rustle, why the gaze.  
 Grandma's place on Sundays

*This is the tram they lived in*



Si. 1.

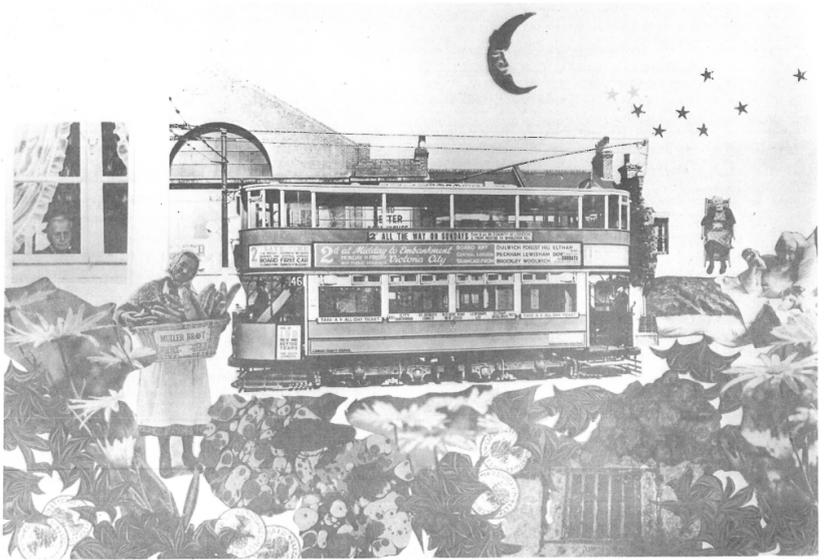


Fig. 2.3. Page from *The Tram Rats*

## At home in the ruins: Fonthill Pavilion

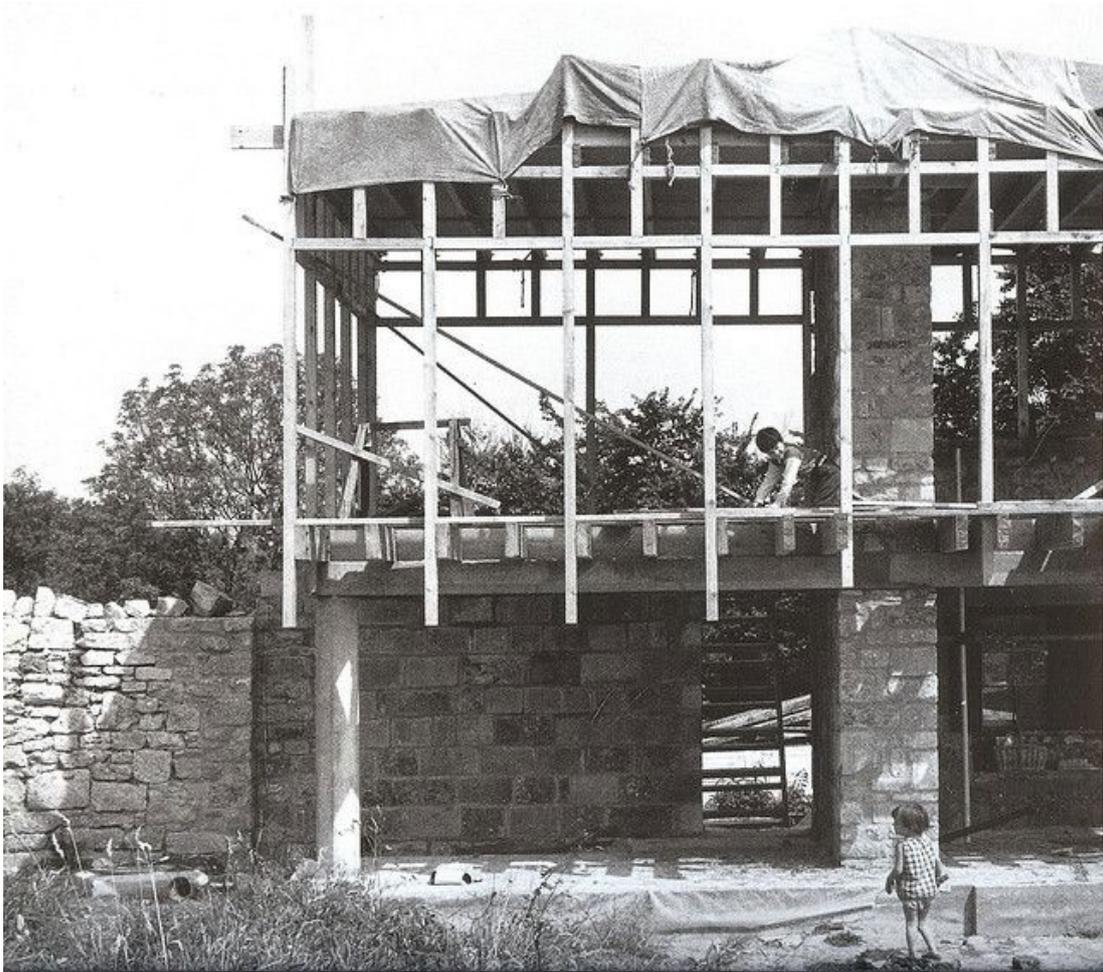
A built structure that encapsulates this is the Smithson's weekend house, Upper Lawn Pavilion (also called Solar Pavilion) which was purchased in 1959 and completed in 1962. They transformed a dilapidated cottage in the estate of the ruined Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire, combining a Brutalist concrete pavilion structure with the picturesque fragments of the old garden wall, chimney, paving and well. This is the perfect manifestation of the idea of building a space dedicated to playing, that combines ruins with the new. For instance, on the one hand it was an homage to Le Corbusier's mass-produced 'Citrohan' house – a house that was designed like a motor car, conceived or organised like a bus or the cabin of a ship: a slick machine for living. On the other, the idea was to get as close to the elements as possible, even if this meant experiencing discomfort. Their aim was to 'build like a farmer', drawing on 'not only the visual, but what a place smells like, how the wind hits it.'<sup>65</sup> They deliberately chose to strip the appliances back to the bare minimum, installing a sink and a dishwasher but no fridge, oven or hob. Instead, cooking took place outside with the doors open so that the patio and the garden formed an outside room. A steep ladder led up to an undefined bedroom space: at night, the family unrolled mattresses and placed them on the floor. If you were too hot in the summer, or too cold in the winter, due to the large windows – this was part of the experience. The narrative that the Smithsons told through the photographs of the space make an important statement about their vision of modern life that depended on play for its meaning. Consider, for example, the images of Simon and Samantha Smithson playing in makeshift structures on the lawn (playing Camp Mohawk, 1964) or in the scaffolded structure while it was being built. These images of family life are in keeping with this idea of inhabiting a space as undertaking improvisational play. The Smithsons would later go on to publish the 'car-diary' that they collaboratively undertook while driving from London up to the site. This included photographs of the family picnicking and pages of games that were drawn by the children in the backseat of the car. This was their 'private room on wheels': a homely and moveable form fit for a modern family.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Alison Smithson, 'Tisbury', *Architectural Association Journal*, February 1966, p. 212. See also: Jonathan Hill 'Ambiguous Objects: Modernism, Brutalism and the politics of the picturesque' in *The Politics of Making*, Mark Igea Troiani, Helena Webster, eds. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 183-194.

<sup>66</sup> Alison Smithson, *AS in DS: An Eye on the Road* (Delft: Delft University Press, 1983).

Fig. 2.4. Photographs of Upper Lawn Pavilion





The Smithsons considered publishing as a way to fit the world to them, to turn the private findings of the couple and the family unit outwards, to rearrange and manipulate the world, but also as a manifesto. This is evidenced in Alison Smithson's piece 'Caravan – 'Embryo Appliance House"' published in *Architectural Design* in 1959.<sup>67</sup> The article was written in response to that year's International Caravan Exhibition at Earl's Court in London. The article was written in response to that year's International Caravan Exhibition at Earl's Court in London. Smithson sets out to find the positives in the increasing popularity of mobile and static caravans. The issue contained a yellow cardboard insert with an illustration of a caravan that is inhabited by two women in shift dresses and sunglasses. One is driving and another is knitting in front of a television set; the overall impression is one of leisure. But the essay as it is reprinted in *Ordinariness and Light* is illustrated by a series of different images, which provide a kind of visual commentary on their influences. They describe these as 'selected evocative illustrations with captions' and they were published separately in *Architectural and Building News* in July 1956.

The photograph of the caravan that they choose is aesthetically quite different from the kinds of caravans that featured in British Pathé footage from the time: they opt for the slick, ornament-free American Airstream Land Yacht that is captured in front of rocky scenery. Next, there is a patterned 'exotic beetle' as an example of 'acceptable display in a natural setting'. Most caravans, however, are 'totally unacceptable as objects in their display.'<sup>68</sup> There is a photograph of 'Tents of the 33rd Infantry Regiment at Sebastopol, 1955 to show the 'old magic of a large camp site' and a tent in Kurdistan to communicate 'the magic of the desert camp'.<sup>69</sup> Two advertisements: one for a car interior from 1955, being modelled by a glamorous woman, and one for Simoniz Floor Wax depicting two half naked children running carefree with their bath towels. A painting of The Virgin Mary in the Garden of Paradise, c. 1410 is arranged with a photograph of Crofts near Staffin on the Isle of Skye.<sup>70</sup> The final 'positive' examples of mobile domesticity are taken from their own work: an illustration from their Patio and Pavilion exhibit at the *This is Tomorrow* 1956 Exhibition. This inclusion feels curious, considering its aesthetic has been read most commonly as an expression of postwar trauma, but the emphasis here is on the conceptual idea of the 'piece of the world' (the patio) coming together in an 'enclosed space'. They also saw this as complementing their hopes for the House of the Future, including a cut out image of the entrance door, through which the eye land on the private garden space. These images are not directly commented on (seeing as the two texts have been arranged to

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<sup>67</sup> Alison Smithson, 'Caravan—Embryo Appliance House?', *Architectural Design*, Volume 29, September 1959, p. 348.

<sup>68</sup> *Ordinariness and Light*, p. 116.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

run parallel to each other on the page) but construct a visual scrapbook of influences that orients the reader in their private collection of ‘clippings’.

Smithson’s intention was to understand how a caravan might have achieved what prefabricated housing, in their opinion, failed to do: ‘Prefabricated houses of the period just after the war seemed so nearly to miss the desired pattern; to be so near mass production, and yet miss.’ To this end, Smithson sets out to find the positives in the increasing popularity of mobile and static caravans. She was writing in dialogue with Nairn’s ‘Outrage’ column which dismissed them ugly blights on the landscape. She rebuked this by pointing out that their ugliness was in no different from ordinary ‘permanent’ housing built after World War Two. This is a provocative statement but one that is generally in keeping with the Smithsons’ antagonism towards the welfare state’s architectural ideas. Smithson – aligning herself with Eduardo Paolozzi or John Kadinsky – was committed to grasping the allure of mass-produced objects, argues that there must be something redeemable about caravans that architects can learn from: ‘what have the caravan dwellers got? Or think they have got?’<sup>71</sup> Architects must figure out the positive forces at work and respond to them: here is an existing pragmatic and realistic solution to the slow progress of remedying the housing crisis:

they obviously do provide a solution for a lot of people who – perhaps only temporarily – do not want bylaw streets or a garden city set up. To these the caravan provides a ‘home’ *at the right time or the right price*; with little or no outlay on furnishings, and which is technological, twentieth century, new or very nearly so.<sup>72</sup>

It is very much ‘to their credit’ that these people are not prepared to put up with cramped and crowded living conditions with their in-laws or unconverted houses while they wait for ‘the doubtful privilege of inhabiting a boiled-down standardised version of the Garden-City ideal that is positively medieval in the lack of amenities it offers.’ What is especially interesting here is that Smithson is identifying the caravan as a *response* to the subtopian landscape that fixes Billy Fisher in place. Smithson imagines that the caravan’s occupants are a ‘discriminating’ consumer, prepared to leave behind the ‘semi-d vortex of walnut bedroom suite with puckered pink eiderdown and puce china crinoline ladies; an anti-plaster-boy-with-cherries which may even read WHICH.’<sup>73</sup> Note that in this description that it is the frilly, fussy ‘stuff’ that has a vortex-like pull, an effect that is emphasised by the plosive alliteration that follows. The caravan, by contrast, is centrifugal, not centripetal—not collecting the world in, but instead folding the world out of it, like a Swiss army knife, or a cosmetics case. Caravans are not for registering the traces of living but the reverse, for fitting your house to your life.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>72</sup> Alison Smithson, ‘Caravan’.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

Their interiors can be adapted and moulded to you by folding things out and collapsing them down, such as a fold-down table that, with cushions stacked on it, becomes a bed; awnings can be erected outside. Smithson's description of the caravan as an embryo is apt, and not only because it suggests an early model for their speculative proposal for an 'Appliance House': both a caravan and an embryo are figured as a primitive organism that life folds out of. Smithson imagines the caravan as a case for a particular configuration of a self-sufficient nuclear family unit or couple.

In many ways, stripped down to this description, the caravan is analogous to the way that Billy sees Liz: as homely but moveable, fixed but adaptable. It is presented as a potential solution to the same set of problems that aggravate critics of suburban 'subtopia': a formal product of the same tensions and anxieties that manifest themselves in the focus on stuckness and domesticity in Angry Young Men novels. People 'are prepared to put up with some conditions as primitive as their great grandmother knew—*vide*: sanitary arrangements, refuse disposal, mud outside door, children in a field affected by the English climate—to achieve greater gains.' Council estates are presented as a detour from the architectural aspirations of the 1930s as the gains include 'a real feeling of open air and freedom from a pressing, and depressing built world', better achieving the '30s dreams of lambs at play outside the kitchen window' than the architects of that era themselves.<sup>74</sup> This is, of course, the suburban background against which the heroine of Smithson's *Young Girl* is also trying to define herself against. In the final section of the novel, there are fragments that seem like snatches of thoughts from a housewife, disappointed with the lived reality of the council estate compared with the lifestyles promised by advertisements:

The house has not the ad's idyllic situation, the fresh air blowing in, lambs; when I hangout I'm not on the sand dunes hanging out all the yellow washing. But in the suburbs, in fine summers they reach their apogee—for theirs is the world of Sunday grass cutting—the sound pushes and pulls that you have not given up to be a free girl in the country.<sup>75</sup>

### Children's Books

The Smithsons also used children's books and interpreted them as potentially useful ways of thinking about the qualities that one might want to have in a building or dwelling. In addition to *The Tram Rats*, they also wrote short stories (undated) such as 'The Crone Calls', 'You Meet the Robin' and 'Gouda': a particularly charming moral tale about a kindly Gouda cheese that cycles to work every day and gives his presents to a child who has been forgotten by Father Christmas. In fact, Smithson's description of the positive traits of the caravan chime with the idealised version of modernity that

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Young Girl*, p. 263.

could be found in children's books of the 1950s. These representations bring together all the positive qualities that Smithson identifies in the caravan:

The caravan is neat, like a big piece of equipment, has a place for everything like a well-run office, has miniature appliances in scale with the space like a toy home, is as comfortable as this year's space-heated car.<sup>76</sup>

Sitting at the intersection of the architectural model and the children's toy, the miniaturised form underscores its paratactic visual rhetoric suggesting multiple possibilities for a future all at once. Smithson herself might approve of this connection: in 1967 she published the essay 'Beatrix Potter's Places' in *Architectural Design*, arguing that architects should look at the cave-like container space dwellings of Jemima Puddleduck and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle because they are 'total manifestations of the Modern Movement's project':

Architects might be surprised at any suggestion that there was a connection between the houses of Beatrix Potter and those in the post-war style of Aalto (himself) and Le Corbusier: between the house of Mrs Tittlemouse and that for Mr Shodhan in Ahmedabad. Yet the same sort of striking towards good container-spaces, even the same sort of forms can be found in both the books and in the post-war works of the architects. A similarity of intention is also evident in the attitude to objects and possessions. In Beatrix Potter's interiors, objects and utensils in daily use are conveniently located, often on individual hooks or nails, and are all the 'decoration' the 'simple' spaces need, or in fact can take. Those things in secondary use or needing long term storage are in special storage cubicles whose forms define the house space proper - as well as being pleasant spaces in themselves. Here then, we find basic necessities raised to a poetic level: the simple life, well done.<sup>77</sup>

In her view, Potter instinctively understood that spaces 'should be comforting, responsive and protective' and that children's fiction reflected a psychological need for intimate spaces, nooks, crannies and alcoves.<sup>78</sup> Finally, she appeals to a shared history, considering that the officers and committee of a County Planning office are more likely to have delighted in the image of Peter Rabbit's mother stooping to make camomile tea than to have read dense publications on road planning:

It would still be a brave architect who would submit a white house to a County Planning Authority, even though it was suspected that the officers and the lay committee in question read Jemima Puddleduck and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle more often than a text book on, say, motorways.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Alison Smithson, 'Caravan'.

<sup>77</sup> Alison Smithson, 'Beatrix Potter's Places' *Architectural Design*, December 1967, reprinted in van den Heuvel et al. *From the House of the Future to a House of Today*, p. 213.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

The joy of miniaturisation that we can see here is perhaps the joy of being able to inhabit a smaller, safer version of reality: a little utopia. There is something also to be said here about the experience of reading children's books that is similar to the experience of being in a caravan: protected, safe, for a transient duration. Some of the most illuminating depictions of caravans can be found in the proliferation of children's stories about caravans in the late 1940s and the 1950s, such as *Holidays By Sea and River* (1947) and *Country Holiday* by Elizabeth Gould (1948), Lucy W. Bellhouse's *Caravan* series (1935-1960), *Caravan for Three* by Ursula A. Bloom (1947) and *Monty Woodpig's Caravan* by BB (1957), the story of a bachelor hedgehog who marries a dormouse and take their honeymoon in Monty's handbuilt caravan.<sup>80</sup> By the following year, the caravan is being pulled by Monty's 'Bubblebuzz' car because it was very hard work pulling it himself.<sup>81</sup> As Hazel Sheeky Bird writes, the small but important 'camping and tramping' genre emerged as an opportunity for middle-class children to explore itinerant life, albeit in a superficial way.<sup>82</sup> The static connotations of 'camping' combined with the mobility of 'tramping' to produce a safe but transient domestic space promoting a personal freedom and self-sufficiency that remained acceptable to the dominant culture.<sup>83</sup>

Enid Blyton's *The Caravan Family* in 1945 encapsulates the more conservative end of these narratives but I mention it here because it was published at the end of the Second World War, and preempts what Smithson notices over a decade later: that the caravan might prove a pragmatic solution to the housing crisis.<sup>84</sup> It opens with a father coming home from the War to his three children and wife who have been living with their Granny. Determined to find a home of their own, they look at 'Cherry Cottage' with 'roses growing all the way up the walls', but this is unaffordable. So, they purchase two caravans in a nearby field. 'A house on wheels!' exclaims one of the children:

"Daddy is having two bunks made on this side just like a ship has,' said Belinda. 'One, the lower one, can be used as a couch in the day-time, and the other will fold down flat against the wall and be out the way."

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<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth Gould, *Holidays By Sea and River* (London: Blackie & Son, 1947) ; *Country Holiday* (London: Blackie & Son, 1948); Lucy W. Bellhouse: *The Caravan Children* (London: George G. Harrap, 1935), *The Caravan Again* (London: George G. Harrap, 1943); *The Caravan Goes West* (London: George G. Harrap, 1948); *The Caravan Comes Home* (London: George G. Harrap, 1951); *The Christmas Caravan* (London: George G. Harrap, 1955); *The Winter Caravan* (London: George G. Harrap, 1960); Ursula A. Bloom, *Caravan For Three* (London: University Press, 1947); BB (aka Denys Watkins-Pitchford), *Monty Woodpig's Caravan* (Leicester: Edmund Ward, 1957) and its sequel *Monty Woodpig and his Bubblebuzz Car* (Leicester: Edmund Ward, 1958).

<sup>81</sup> *Monty Woodpig and his Bubblebuzz Car* (1958).

<sup>82</sup> Hazel Sheeky Bird *Class, Leisure and National Identity in Children's Literature, 1918-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 6-7.

<sup>83</sup> See the chapter 'Landscape and Tourism in the Camping and Tramping Countryside' for a thorough survey of the sub-genre, pp. 59-86. It is worth noting, too, that the mainstream celebration of caravans made great efforts to differentiate itself from marginalised Traveller communities for whom this was not a novel discovery.

<sup>84</sup> Enid Blyton, *The Caravan Family* (London: Hachette Children's Group, 2015), Google Scholar.

Granny began to get excited.

“It could be very nice,” she said, “yes, very nice. You can have lockers built against the walls to keep your things in. Pretty curtains at the windows. A flap-table built against the wall, that lets down flat when you don’t want it.”<sup>85</sup>

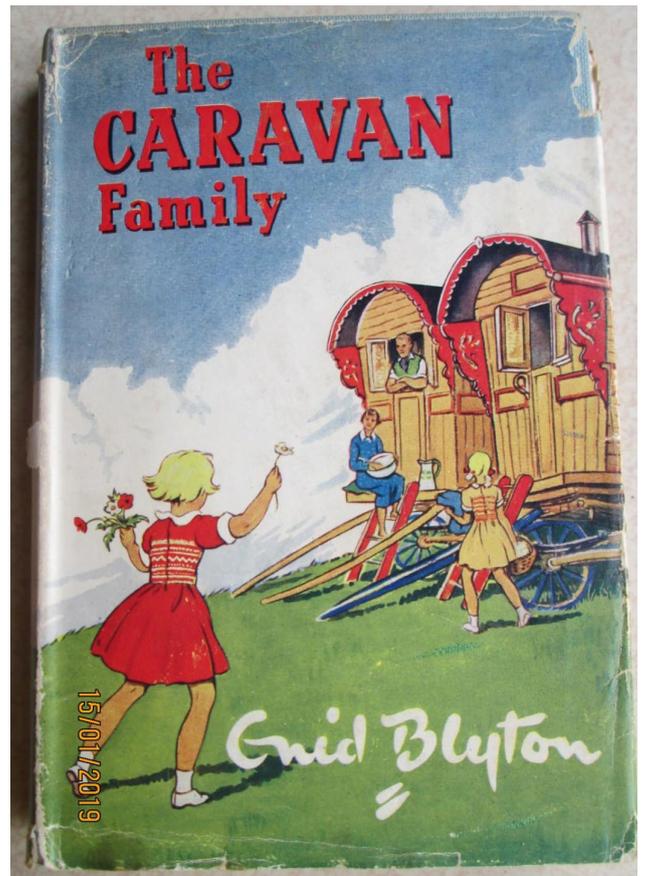
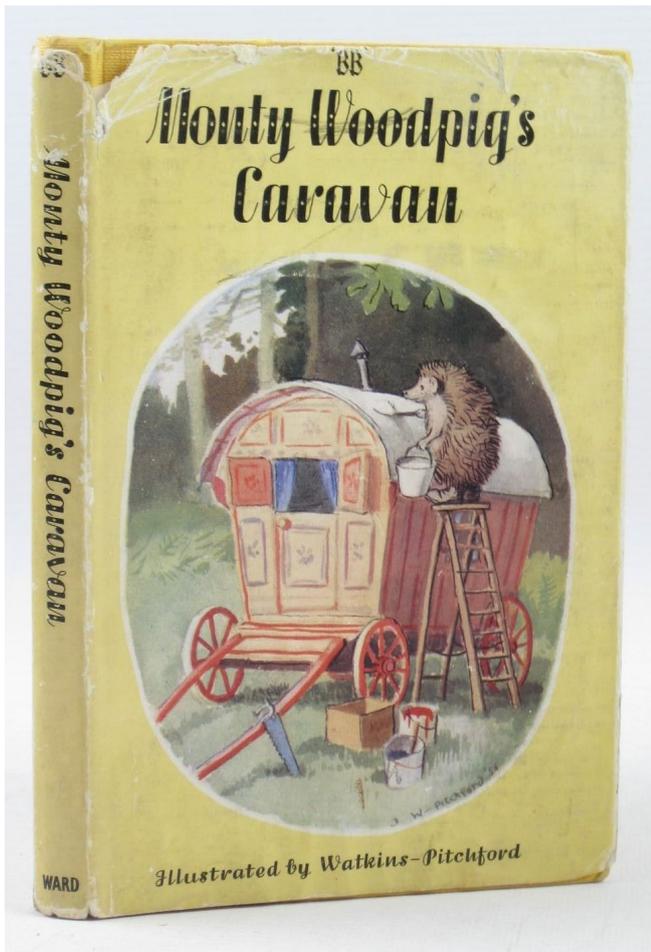
It was ‘the greatest fun in the world, unpacking everything and finding a place for it in the caravan’. The children learn that ‘the rule when you are living in a caravan is that everything has a place, and must be kept there.’<sup>86</sup> Indeed, this is the experience of inhabitation that Alison also imagines and praises in Beatrix Potter’s interiors. And so, from this eclectic and rich selection of sources, a new understanding of domestic inhabitation emerges.

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<sup>85</sup> Blyton, Google Scholar.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

Fig 2.5. *Monty Woodpig's Caravan* book from 1957 and the 1956 cover of Blyton's *The Caravan Family*.



## Conclusion:

In these vignettes we find evidence of a lived practice that looked to childhood for inspiration. This chapter has outlined some of the ways that the Smithsons' understanding of Brutalism was much more complex than the monolithic image of concrete conveys. They were interested in how 'playing' was a serious activity through which subjects could engage their imagination and gain a greater sense of place and history. Viewing space as having a powerful narrative dimension, the Smithsons were very much of their time in their interest in the child-centred family as a modern, forward-looking configuration. It posits that Brutalism was intensely interested in life as it was being lived and were looking for new forms to accommodate a 'healthy' playful modern household. This chapter has uncovered some of the more unexpected parallels that can be found between the disenfranchised voices in much of the social realist literature and film of the time: namely, that they were both responding to dissatisfaction with large-scale, state-sponsored housing projects applied *en masse* that would erode a sense of 'place'. Where they differ, however, is that much of this anger (or in the case of *Billy Liar* tragicomic angst) has a conservative strain, an attachment to old forms, even if these forms have problems of their own. Yet while the domestic often becomes the target of this angst, the Smithsons used it as a starting point for working out how people might want to live differently. In their work, mobility and freedom is thought of as something that is linked to family life: the forms I have explored here show how different kinds of play informed their thinking. They were interested in how spaces could facilitate a creative state of play. On top of this, writing and collaging – as textual practices – emerge as the perfect transitory and contingent form for capturing these freewheeling and collaborative experiments.

This distinctly postwar model of play emphasises the absorptive state that players enter into, shifting the emphasis from the designer's vision for play equipment onto how it was being used. However, predicting the needs of the user would prove to be a difficult endeavour for the Smithsons: especially when you are dealing with cutting and pasting, forming and moulding shared histories. On the one hand, they were celebrating the idiosyncrasies of the family unit, but this would prove difficult to scale up for a mass housing project. Would they be able to accurately predict how people might want to customise the 'shells' that they were being given? As can be observed here, the Smithsons were apt at looking at the 'stuff' of everyday life twice: they saw it as part of their roles as modernist architects to 'read' their cultural moment and respond accordingly. However, this imaginative process of 'reading' has some distinct limits. Their positionality went largely unremarked on as they attempted to pick through the bric-a-brac of the postwar world and make something new from it. The luxury of taking refuge in temporary relief from a primary residence is not commented upon here and so there is a

nostalgic strain that is reminiscent of Mollie Panter Downes' 1949 novel *One Fine Day*.<sup>87</sup> Set in the hillside village of Wealding, a 'perfect village in aspic' that has 'curdled and changed colour', Laura Marshall's comfortable life has been inconvenienced by the War.<sup>88</sup> Due to the shortages of servants, she finds herself bound to her house and this domesticity has turned her mind into a ragbag full of 'scraps of forgotten brightness, odd bits of purple and gold, hopelessly mixed up with laundry lists and recipes for doing something quick and unconvincingly delicious with dried egg.'<sup>89</sup> Coming upon a 'gipsy's caravan' which 'refuses to come to life as a home', Laura is struck with sudden envy for a simple life with simple work, 'helping with the harvest, mending pots and pans and the old rush-seated chairs out of the cottages, or doctoring sick people's animals.'<sup>90</sup> In other words, these visions of mobile domesticities might have a touch of middle-class romanticism about them.

The Smithsons' approach, as can be observed by Alison positing Beatrix Potter books as Modernist, depended on juxtaposing incongruent material and viewing it in new relational contexts. This is inventive but, as will become clear, not infallible: it is a process that depends on the imagination. As they worked on their major social housing project Robin Hood Gardens (1969-1972), they would need to anticipate how this building was going to be used for generations to come. Indeed, this would also prove a central concern of their contemporary and long-term admirer, B.S. Johnson. In the next chapter, we turn, then, to some of the strategies that Johnson and the Smithsons applied to their books and buildings to buffer them against the unknowns of the future.

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<sup>87</sup> Mollie Panter-Downes, *One Fine Day* (London: Virago, 1985).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-21.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

### Chapter 3: Future Anxiety

B.S. Johnson's 1964 novel *Albert Angelo* contains a passage in which its protagonist, a trained architect who earns his living as a supply teacher, relishes a precious day set aside to 'spend at my board, working, how marvellous, a whole free day to work, to do real work, my work, real work, vocation. I can put in a really hard day at the arts centre design.'<sup>1</sup> A feeling familiar to any chronic procrastinator, the sentence's fidgetiness belies a latent anxiety that this productive day will not materialise. In the account of paralysis that follows, Albert feels an urge to clean the kitchen ('I'll do it later on. If I feel like it.');

to make a coffee at an excruciatingly slow pace ('stirred brown milk-white hot, table by my board, my workplace, my alter, do me a favour');

to avenge his romantic disappointments; fix his broken trouser fly; visit his parents... Unable to commit to a single projected version of events, Albert draws three lines and abandons his board for the pub:

Ceiling. Just a blank. Look Albert, mate, you're not going to work well this morning. Go out and have a drink. You'll feel guilty. But it's no good just sitting here facing the problem. Go away, forget about it, and it'll come to you, solve itself. Yes. As it has before. Yes.<sup>2</sup>

There are two ways of looking at this account. Firstly, that Albert has failed to plan, squandering his time and resources with nothing to show for it. Or, secondly, that Albert has, in fact, had a busy day – a busy day of drafting and redrafting what this day is going to be. This passage dramatises the central preoccupation of the novel: how to plan for a future when you are acutely, cripplingly aware that chaos and contingency will disrupt it. Through the triangulation of failed architect, supply teacher and poet, Johnson shows that Albert is possessed by an anxiety about the future that means, paradoxically, he is buffeted by the contingencies of the present. All three occupations have different relationships with futurity: architects build spaces which the future will inhabit; teachers shape the future lives of children; and poets formulate new ways of thinking through language. Plans deal with the future but are made in the present and are therefore a balancing act of including what you require *now* while keeping your options open to prepare for its not-yet-known contents. Albert struggles to manage the future. He shuttles between durations, jumping from the single day to the way of life or sense of destiny implied in 'vocation'. Albert's vocation is architecture: a career that ostensibly deals with long term planning, in contrast to his constant orientation to the short term as a supply teacher. Supply teaching is presented as a temporary interlude in the overall trajectory of his life. This is further emphasised any the fact that Albert dwells in the negative space created by unexpected interruptions in other people's lives. For instance, a returning teacher who has recovered from a bout of illness

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<sup>1</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* in *The B.S. Johnson Omnibus* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

‘does not introduce himself. He does not seem curious about the work you have been doing with his class.’<sup>3</sup> Albert reflects how:

Always in supply there is this mysterious figure whom you are replacing. You try to build up your own conception of him from what others let fall in the conversation, from his room, his desk, his children. Mr. MacKenzie. Whom you are replacing.<sup>4</sup>

Due to this emergency ‘filling in’, a supply teacher must at all times be able to improvise plans at short notice, both in the classroom and in their own life: they *are* the contingency plan. As Albert points out to his mother in response to her enquiry as to whether he has secured a job at a new school yet: ‘the holidays are still on, and therefore they do not know what vacancies there will be for supply teachers.’<sup>5</sup> Once term has commenced, Albert describes a typical day ‘on call’:

You have a phone call from them sometimes, but usually you have to go to the office and wait until someone wants you. You have a phone call from them this morning. The woman gives you directions to the school, and you look it up in your A to Z to make quite sure. You put it in a briefcase those textbooks experience has suggested will cover most of the subjects you are likely to be required to teach.<sup>6</sup>

Albert has to prepare for his days based on approximations and predictions gleaned from his past experiences as he steps into the unknown. In this way, Albert’s supply work can be seen as an obverse to his work as an architect. Architects are also tasked with looking into the future: an architectural plan is a kind of metaphorical briefcase filled with ‘textbooks’ – resources that aim to buffer against the unknowns that this future contains. Yet this is difficult: as Albert’s frantic day off shows us, by the time you have finished drafting a plan it will need revising and redrafting again to accommodate the changes that have unfolded while you have been making it.

The *thematic* exploration of ‘failed architecture’ is facilitated through precise planning and plotting. The technological *form* of the novel is exploited to accommodate maximum contingency. The book constitutes a ‘built’ experiment, carefully constructed as a three dimensional argument about the evolution of the novel to match the ever-changing pace of present reality. He turns the book into a building. Indeed, this chapter considers the way that Johnson’s affinity with Alison and Peter Smithson can help us to understand the tensions animating *Albert Angelo*. In my previous chapter, I demonstrated some of the ways that the Smithsons experimented with forms of creative transiency to think through what kinds of dwellings might be appropriate to the kinds of modern lives that people might want to be living: from the caravan, to the weekend house, to the car conceptualised as a room

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> *AA*, p. 23

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

on wheels. Play was a mode of transient dwelling that celebrated transiency as an end in itself. They theorised that the transient, enjoyably consumed, might create the taste for more transient things and wanted to design corresponding forms that could contain multiple and easily changeable possibilities for a future.

They were tasked with working out how best to integrate the pleasures of the transient with the 'permanent' when planning to build houses with a traditionally long lifespan. Perhaps their most challenging brief was Robin Hood Gardens, as they needed to 'scale up' from the comfortable and generative small family unit to a large social housing project. This chapter considers the shared ways that the Smithsons and Johnson were committed to building forms that could accommodate contingency and the strategies that they deployed to protect against a not-yet-known future.

Furthermore, this was an ethical position. It is crucial that Albert is not designing a private house for clients but a distinctly new type of building that developed as part of postwar amenity and social welfare provisions with the specific remit of encouraging arts practice using communal facilities.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, both the producers of books and buildings anticipate the contingencies of reading: how each will be 'interpreted' by its users. At the moment at which both are 'given' to the public, it is impossible to know exactly how the micro will interact with the macro, or, to put it another way, how an individual might *inhabit* a larger structure. Reading the Smithsons side by side with Johnson helps to frame the kinds of spatial experiment that Johnson was making.

First, it is worth elucidating the connections between the Smithsons and Johnson. Johnson was highly interested in developments in contemporary architecture but he particularly admired the work of the Smithsons. Frank Fisher, for example, recalls how he 'had a very definite, and quite good knowledge about architecture. That's one memory that's very clear, that he was excited about the *Economist* building in London, and I remember him taking us there and looking at it [...] he had a great admiration for that pair, the Smithsons.'<sup>8</sup> He constantly stressed in articles and radio interviews the relationship between writing and architecture, and specifically between his own work and that of the New Brutalists. The narrator of his novel *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (1973) quips in the epigraph that the modern novel should be 'nasty, Brutalist and short'.<sup>9</sup> Johnson's profile of the

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<sup>7</sup> Graeme Evans gives a thorough account of the origins of the arts centre. Evans describes how the national Arts Council formed part of a postwar settlement of public subsidies based on the idea of the 'right' of access in culture, as specified in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts.' Thus 'accepting for the first time the contemporary and performing arts alongside museums and galleries [government funded since the eighteenth century] as a permanent national responsibility. Graeme Evans, *Cultural Planning: An Urban Renaissance*.<sup>2</sup> (Oxford: Routledge, 2001), p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> Fisher is referring to the Smithsons' *Economist* building in St James St, London SW1, built between 1959 and 1964.

<sup>9</sup> B.S. Johnson, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (Picador: London, 2013).

Smithsons in *London Life* in 1965 lays out most explicitly their affinities. Johnson called the piece ‘London: The Moron-Made City, or, Just a Load of Buildings with Cars in Between’, which immediately provides a strong indication of where he situated himself in relation to reconstruction. The titular quote comes from the Smithsons’ statement that:

The English don’t seem to have set out to build a city as such, let alone formed the concept of a city as a work of art, which is of course what we see it as potentially; a collective work of art, that is. And if a city is not a work of art then really it’s a nothing, it’s a load of old buildings with cars in between... [But] if a city is this kind of work of art you live in, then the living there itself takes on a marvellous sort of extra quality: you are suddenly made aware of very ordinary things like entering or moving or being quiet, things which suddenly become positive and not residual. That’s the trouble with Londoners: they see the city merely as a mechanism with which you can tinker to make it all right: they don’t see it as a work of art, a live thing, a living organism, which could make life marvellous. You don’t have to start building London all over again.<sup>10</sup>

This can be taken as an argument against wholesale demolition or excision; against uniform, quickly-erected concrete developer’s blocks or systematic town building that was happening with the New Towns Movement.<sup>11</sup> They have a humanist aspiration for what life might be like – the ethos that underpinned the creation of the welfare state – but were vehemently against the way that most architects and planners were going about achieving this. Johnson and the Smithsons were both unified by their general dissatisfaction with the progress that had been made *because* they shared the commitment that ordinary people deserved better. Johnson makes it clear when he complains that:

Only in painting, sculpture and (to a lesser extent) music have the pioneers of the Modern Movement become the establishment in their respective arts. In literature and in architecture the reactionaries who use the techniques of Dickens and put up Shell Centres are not only in the majority but even represent these arts to many people.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear to see that they shared the sense of being lone innovators in a world full of conservatives. Johnson closes his essay with the agitation that was more urgent than ever that the Smithson’s approach to building was given serious consideration:

It may not be so disastrous that advances in literature fail to be consolidated: but those in architecture involve more serious and fundamental elements determining the basic quality of

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<sup>10</sup> B.S. Johnson quotes the Smithsons in full in his essay ‘London: the Moron-Made City, or Just a Load of Old Buildings with Cars in Between’ for *London Life* (October 1965), pp. 23-29. Reprinted in *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson* edited by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew, Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp. 398-406. Available on Google Scholar.

<sup>11</sup> See Rosemary Wakeman, *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and Anthony Alexander, *Britain’s New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> *London: the Moron-Made City*; the Shell Centre, the headquarters of the oil company Shell, was built in 1963 and Johnson is using it as an example of the trend for high-rise corporate office blocks in London.

living and we simply cannot afford to ignore anyone who has anything to say as practical and original as Alison and Peter Smithson.<sup>13</sup>

As I will go on to explore in the analysis that follows, I will probe the extent to which Johnson really believes that literary invention is of less importance than architectural ones: or whether this is typical of the anxiety that plagues his *oeuvre* – an anxiety that he has already failed where the Smithsons might still go on to succeed.

To this end, Johnson's Introduction to his collection *Aren't You Rather Young To Be Writing Your Memoirs?*<sup>2</sup> (1973) acts as a manifesto for Johnson's aims. It is worth briefly elucidating because it provides an insight into the historical anxieties that shaped his practice: chiefly, a loss of faith in narrative progression. As Hanna Meretoja and Julia Jordan have argued, the atrocities and the trauma of the Second World War posed an ethical problem to the potentials of storytelling. Meretoja writes that 'remembering is not only oriented to the past; by telling stories we take part not just in creating a version of the past, but also in shaping the intersubjective world that we co-inhabit and in refiguring the ways in which we – as individuals and communities – orient ourselves to the future.'<sup>14</sup> Telling stories both expands and diminishes our sense of the possible.

One of the key crises of narrative in the wake of the War was an apprehension of the uses and abuses of narrative: for many writers it was an untenable mode of fiction. Johnson was looking to the French avant-garde to see how they were responding to the loss of faith in 'the ability of individuals to impose sense on a fundamentally strange world.'<sup>15</sup> He wrote that:

Nathalie Sarraute once described literature as a relay race, the baton of innovation passing from one generation to another. The vast majority of British novelists have dropped the baton, stood still, turned back, or not even realised that there is a race.<sup>16</sup>

Writers such as Sarraute, Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet all shared a belief that storytelling had become impossible because narrative 'represents order' and creates 'the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entire universe.'<sup>17</sup> Their formal response was to offer little structural orientation or reconciliation. They repurposed the leftover bric-a-brac of the traditional novel, reinventing the props of pre-war French Surrealism such as the 'ready-mades' of consumer society, from mannequins and glossy photos to clichés of desire and eroticism. In these novels,

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<sup>13</sup> *Well Done God!* Via Google Scholar.

<sup>14</sup> Hanna Meretoja, *The Narrative Turn in Fiction and Theory: The Crisis and Return of Storytelling from Robbe-Grillet to Tournier* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), via Google Scholar.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The postwar crisis of storytelling' via Google Scholar.

<sup>16</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Meretoja, *Ibid.*

narrative becomes a game of putting together that could be treated as an object of bemused interest, to be cobbled together in different contexts and combinations. Yet this was a completely different cultural landscape of bric-a-brac: one with an intensely physical character, as I have been arguing.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the London of *Albert Angelo* is a mixture of old and new, of litter and rubble: ‘a little grass there, too, and rubbish of various kinds littered around—bicycle wheels, bottomless enamel buckets, tins, rotting cardboard. Some of the houses have patches where new London stocks show up against older blackened ones; then you know what happened to the rest of Circus.’<sup>19</sup> His London is produced through contingency: it embodies an ethics of trial and error over a single governing philosophy. Whether shaped by commercial interests or disrupted by randomised bomb destruction, this *real* scruffy city provides Johnson’s foundational material:

The novelist cannot legitimately or successfully embody present-day reality in exhausted forms. If he is serious, he will be making a statement which attempts to change society towards a condition he conceives to be better, and he will be making at least implicitly a statement of faith in the evolution of the form in which he is working. Both these aspects of making are radical ; this is inescapable unless he chooses escapism. Present-day reality is changing rapidly ; it always has done, but for each generation it seems to be speeding up. Novelists must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality, their own reality and not Dickens’ reality or Hardy’s reality or even James Joyce’s reality.<sup>20</sup>

To ‘invent, borrow, steal or cobble from other media’ sounds a lot like the Smithsons’ ‘as found’ philosophy, to which I will now turn in order to further draw out the way that Johnson is deploying architecture as a metaphor in *Albert Angelo*.

### The ‘As Found’

A key parallel between the Smithsons and Johnson is their shared interest in ‘anti-design’ design. The ‘as found’ is a crucial concept that sheds new light on Johnson’s work. The concept developed over time and so is worth plotting carefully here. The Smithsons first conceptualised it when they were working closely with Nigel Henderson. They saw in his photographs ‘a perceptive recognition of the actuality around his house in Bethnal Green: children’s play-graphics; repetition of “kind” in doors used as site hoardings; the items in the detritus on bombed sites, such as the old boot, heaps of nails,

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<sup>18</sup> For a reading of some of the ways that Johnson’s attempts to inhabit Samuel Beckett’s style collapse under the weight of the traumatic memory of being evacuated, see Andy Wimbush ‘Christ this is Getting Tedious!': Beckettian Tone Versus Autobiographical Material in B.S. Johnson’s Trawl’ in *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction* edited by Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 61-78.

<sup>19</sup> *AA*, pp. 13-14

<sup>20</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. 16-17.

fragments of sack or mesh and so on.’<sup>21</sup> Indeed, as I argued in Chapter 2, these patterns were taken as ‘traces’: ways of ‘reading’ the fabric of a place and how it came to be. The ‘as found’ was a ‘new seeing of the ordinary, an openness to how prosaic ‘things’ could re-energise our inventive activity.’<sup>22</sup> In the early fifties this was a way of bravely confronting what the postwar world was actually like in a ‘society that had nothing’.<sup>23</sup> At this time, the ‘as found’ was a way of looking at what was already there and, by putting it into new contexts, renewing the fabric of the scarred everyday. This was emphatically different from the ideas that were prevalent and fashionable in design as voiced by socialist intellectuals such as Herbert Read and Roland Penrose, who represented for them the standards of ‘good taste’ in 1950s Britain.<sup>24</sup> The Smithsons claimed that *politics* were no longer appropriate to their needs. This sounds like a surprising statement, but what they meant by it was that they needed to create a visual language of the ordinary, the useful, and the as-found which could compete with the power of the glossy, aspirational images of consumer culture. Of course, to claim apolitical neutrality is a political statement in itself, but it contextualises one of the reasons why their work resists incorporation into a neat narrative about welfare state building projects: they were against the ‘establishment modernism’ epitomised by the Council of Industrial Design.

Their position is illustrated by, for instance, their school building at Hunstanton in Norfolk. Hunstanton was deliberately designed in opposition to the work of Mary Crowley and David Medd. Crowley and Medd were influential architects who worked for the Hertfordshire County Council school programme, which then passed to the Ministry of Education. Their work began with the child: they reconciled factory production (such as prefabrication) with a humane, social architecture in service of the child.<sup>25</sup> They designed ‘from the inside out’, allowing architectural resources to be devoted to giving pleasure to their occupants, although ‘usually at the expense of stolid exteriors.’<sup>26</sup> Responding pragmatically to the high birth rate and scarcity of materials, they devised a prefabricated building system – a kit of lightweight components that could be assembled into various grid-based plans – to house these interiors, and enriched them with child-sized furniture and sanitary-ware, systematic yet vivid colour schemes, innovations in lighting, and commissioned art works, murals and

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<sup>21</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson ‘The “As Found” and the “Found”’, quoted in *As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary: British Architecture and Art of the 1950s*, Claude Lichtenstein and Thomas Schreggenberger (eds.) (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers 2001), pp. 40-45, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See Alice Twenlow, ‘“A Throw-Away Esthetic”: New Measures and Metaphors in Product Design Criticism, 1955-1961’, *Sifting the Trash: A History of Design Criticism* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 19-90.

<sup>25</sup> Geraint Franklin, ‘Built-in Variety’: David and Mary Medd and the Child-Centred Primary School, 1944-80’ *Architectural History* 55 (2012), pp. 321-367, p. 324.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

fabrics. They built fifty schools by applying this same ‘system’ while never repeating the same plan.<sup>27</sup> The Smithsons’ were antipathetic to this approach because they felt it did not create a strong visual identity, retaining the essence of the individual parts. Uniformity of design for its own sake lacks authenticity and specificity. By prioritising this, they asserted that the aesthetic is always, on some level, political. At Hunstanton, they wrote that:

The materials, whether the precast slabs, the Braithwaite water tank and the light fittings, were ‘as found’. We were making a composition out of common existing components rather than designing them.<sup>28</sup>

Looking through the large glass windows, it is possible to see the purposefully exposed sinks and plumbing and anticipate the flow of children as they used the space. The school was a manifesto of ‘honest’, plain-speaking materials and structural integrity. For the Smithsons, ‘every element is truly what it appears to be, serving as necessary structure and necessary decoration’ and they had ‘an existential responsibility’ to make sure that every component was as visible in its function as it claimed.<sup>29</sup>

Further key points in their development of the ‘as found’ were *Parallel of Life and Art* in 1953 at the ICA and ‘Patio and Pavilion’ for *This is Tomorrow* in 1956: both of which were produced in collaboration with Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi, the founding members of The Independent Group. For *Parallel of Life and Art*, they exhibited a didactic collection of photographs of images that came from ordinary life, from nature, from industry, architecture, art – images that were available to everyone but that invisibly plumbed conscious perception.<sup>30</sup> The ‘as found’ advocates for a mode of attention, a way of engaging with what already exists and following the traces that appear. The process of building up the collection reveals important and specific connections that allow the viewer to grasp a larger totality by paying attention to the close-up detail. So, by building up a collection of fragments, it would become possible to better understand a messy, live whole: the totality of life.

The collection could then provide a starting place. For instance, the House of the Future, discussed in Chapter 1, can be thought of ‘as found’ because of the way it ‘learns’ from the Smithsons’ personal collection of advertisements. They created a found image to match the powerful imagery they were

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<sup>27</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see the Introduction to Roy Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood: Children, Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Postwar England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Chantel Besteman, *The School of Hunstanton, too simple or pleasant? The position of the Hunstanton School in the Architectural Debate* (Delft: Delft University of Technology, 2021), p. 17. Available at <<http://resolver.tudelft.nl/uuid:76644747-fc12-4590-8107-f278dac28922>>.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Crinson, *Alison and Peter Smithson* (Liverpool: Historic England, 2018), p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Lichtenstein and Schregenberger, p. 30.

admiring in magazines. Yet another house that they designed in 1956 looked very different but can also be described as ‘as found’. The Sugden House was a private house commissioned by the ARUP engineer Derek Sugden and his wife Jean. The couple wanted ‘a simple house, an ordinary house, but this should not exclude it from being a radical house.’<sup>31</sup> At first glance, you might notice its resemblance to the anonymously-authored vernacular architecture of Britain’s suburbs. John Macarthur notes that ‘Sugden House is a close imitation of those aspects of suburban speculative building most offensively ugly to modernist architects.’<sup>32</sup> Yet what strikes us as unconventional is the arrangement of the windows – how the holes are punched out of it. As Macarthur notes, the ‘unexpected symmetry in the Smithson’s fenestration’ reveal:

that this is architecture and not expedient building. Are these details quotation marks? Subtle improvements? A kind of liminal practice of architecture? Is this a mocking appropriation of the ordinary in artifice, or a sincere proposal of housing reform?<sup>33</sup>

The Sugden House is a kind of architectural Robbe-Grillet, assembled from readymade components: from second-hand stock brick and standardised Critall window systems. Its intrigue is the way that it is curiously mimetic of consumer choice, with already-available materials taken ‘of the shelf’ and arranged to produce a unique identity. In this way, the H.O.F. and the Sugden House have similar preoccupations with how to draw an identity using what is already there, whether this is looking back and using worn-out forms in new ways, or appropriating a ready-made plastic house that you have selected from a marketplace of technological pod-like dwellings.

By the time that the Smithsons were working on the first and only major social housing project that they would get to build, Robin Hood Gardens, the context was very different from the 1950s where there *were* internal debates taking place about modernism but the welfare state was still full of promise: the fractures that were already there deepened as containerisation, homelessness and post-imperial racism became more fraught. However, they decided to revisit their ‘as found’ method in the planning stages as the site in Poplar, East London took them geographically back to where they had gone on walks with Henderson during the 1950s. Against this backdrop, they read the ‘traces’ of the area’s history, taking rubbings of old street signs and researching the history of the trades, residents and shops back to 1703. They sought to get a sense of how these fragments of history and place should be adapted for the future. They worked to put down ‘mental roots’ to ensure that ‘oddments

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<sup>31</sup> Helena Webster, *Modernism without Rhetoric: Essays on the work of Alison and Peter Smithson* (London: Wiley and Sons, 1997), p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> John Macarthur, *The Picturesque, Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

of past character' would be taken into account: 'rose bay willow-herb, children overturning wrecked cars, the smell of curry on the stairs of rejected tenements.'<sup>34</sup> With these, they decided they must:

Sense

Smell

Touch

Experience - for only in this way will we understand why Robin Hood came to look as it does.

These acts as prompts for the imagination. Indeed, with a plan of this scale they were dealing in collective stories that would be cohabited. One of the fragments that they decided to carry into the future was the street because it was a sheltered space that fostered community and vitality. They 'picked up' and 'turned over' the tenement buildings so that they were no longer horizontal terraces but became 'streets in the sky', stacked vertically. Henderson wrote that when he was taking his photographs, he built up a large stock of negatives taken in the streets of Bethnal Green, Poplar, Hackney, Bow and Stepney. He thought of 'the small box-like houses and shops etc. as a sort of stage set against which people were more or less consciously acting.'<sup>35</sup> Life's *action* took place in the shared space of the street. The Smithsons wrote that 'in the suburbs and the slums the vital relationship between the house and the street survives, children run about, people stop and talk, vehicles parked and tinkered with... you know the milkman, you are outside *your* house in *your* street.'<sup>36</sup> They saw the street as a form that could accommodate the changing fluctuations of the everyday and that it was worth preserving. In their 'Criteria for Mass Housing' (1959), the text that formed the basis for Johnson's sympathetic critique 'The Moron Made City', they set out a list of questions that they would ask of any new building: Can it adapt itself to various ways of living. Does it liberate the occupants from old restrictions or straitjacket them into new ones?<sup>37</sup>

They designed the flats with this in mind, providing opportunities for customisation and self-expression. Peter Smithson recommended the stalls at the nearby Chrisp Street market as a place to buy cheap furnishing materials and suggested that this would be a great way to spend 'slack' money.<sup>38</sup> They colour-coded the outside of the building in such a way that would 'build-up with the tenants' curtains and so on the life and interest of the faces of the buildings.'<sup>39</sup> Inside, too, 'the dwellings are

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<sup>34</sup> As described in *The Smithsons on Housing* (dir. B.S. Johnson) Broadcast on BBC on the 10th July 1970.

<sup>35</sup> Henderson quoted in Lichtenstein and Schreggenberger, p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson in Vittoria Di Palma, Diana Periton, Marina Lathouri eds., *Intimate Metropolis: Urban Subjects in the Modern City* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), p. 199.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in John Furse, *The Smithsons at Robin Hood* (Plymouth: University of Plymouth, 1982), available at <<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/2467>>, p. 105.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

<sup>39</sup> Furse, p. 121.

stated as enclosures but the exact internal use left open to interpretation to reflect the interchangeable use of rooms that ordinary dwellings require.’<sup>40</sup> The Smithsons hoped that the building would be able to respond and adapt to unforeseen factors:

Its form - we hope - will respond to the way people wish to live today, with their belongings, their domestic appliances, their cars. Like the first Georgian square built in London it is a model for those who see it and will recognise it as new and desirable, and a place its inhabitants will enjoy generation after generation.<sup>41</sup>

Thus here we have multiple ways of approaching Johnson’s use of architecture in *Albert Angelo*. In particular, we can see the ways that the Smithsons dealt head-on with contingency and planned with an acute awareness that they could not possibly accurately predict what the future would actually hold for their building. In other words, they attempt to *manage* contingency by embracing it: which, for an author lacking faith in narrative progression, must have proved an interesting approach.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Fig. 3.1. Sandra Lousada, Photographs of Robin Hood Gardens, 1972



## The Book as Building

*Albert Angelo* is a novel about the paralysing anxiety of building into an unknown future that is communicated very effectively through the architecture of the book. Johnson literally turns the novel into a building by putting a window in the middle of it: a serving hatch through which the reader is presented with a future event. The window takes the form of a rectangular hole, cut in pages 149-152, so as to reveal the penultimate three lines of page 154, which read suddenly:

Struggled to take back his knife, and inflicted on him a mortal wound above his right eye  
(The blade penetrating to a depth of two inches) from which he died instantly.

The interruption, like the death depicted, is both 'instant' and violent. The reader is forced to give up the ability to anticipate what will come next; instead the window aligns menacingly with the text it disrupts, so that the reader experiences three different ends.

Terry

Struggled to take back his knife, and inflicted on him a mortal wound above his right eye  
(The blade penetrating to a depth of two inches) from which he died instantly.

When we finally read the text in its proper places, it emerges that the reader is reading a historical account of the poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe's death. The hole is a surprise: you cannot help but fall down the trap that Johnson has laid and he prevents the reader from getting from the start to the end of the book, circumventing narrative conventions. It also makes the reader aware of the material physicality of the book: in certain copies the holes are physically cut out, so the reader could push their fingers through the slot. Additionally, it puts the mechanics of novel-writing on display. Just as the New Brutalism emphasised the 'woodness of wood, the sadness of sand', Johnson draws attention to Albert's 'Albertness, hisness, itness, uniqueness'.<sup>42</sup> Although Albert is alive, saved from this sudden violent death, the reader becomes aware of his flimsy fictionality. Johnson makes a convincing argument about the chaos of life. The voice of Johnson-as-narrator breaks through in a section aptly titled 'Disintegration' when he explicitly lays out the connections that he is making between supply teacher, architect, and the final component of his triangulation, poet:

—look, I'm trying to tell you something of what I feel about being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry, through the object correlative of an architect who has to earn his living as a teacher. This device you cannot have failed to see creaking, ill-fitting

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<sup>42</sup> *AA*, p. 169.

at many places, many places, for architect *manqués* can earn livings very nearly connected with their art, and no poet has ever lived by his poetry, and architecture has a functional aspect quite lacking in poetry, and, simply, architecture is just not poetry.<sup>43</sup>

However, although Johnson appears to make his intentions clearer, by describing the device as ‘creaking, ill fitting at many places’, he downplays and distracts from the way that it is through the architecture of the text that he makes his point about the messy contingency of life very effectively. Julia Jordan captures this tension in her writing on Johnson. She puts his complicated relationship with failure clearly:

He does not fail, or not in any simple sense, though he does compose an aesthetic of failure; it is not, as some critics have argued, that Johnson’s work doesn’t manage to be chancy enough; rather, the accidental, the contingent, the capricious details of experience are all grasped and held, affectionately but over-firmly, in a way that is fatal to their elusive qualities, and this paradox is what makes his prose so suggestive of the anxieties that accrete around this species of writing.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, he *succeeds* at communicating his point through the book’s materiality. Its form, like the Smithsons’ architecture, demonstrates what he frames as an ethical commitment to the ‘truth’ of ‘reality’: that is, that *narrative* is constantly attempting to integrate a world that cannot be marshalled into the traditional form of the book which demands linear progression through time and space. His ‘aesthetic of failure’ is one of the reasons that Johnson was so incensed by being called ‘experimental’. He was emphatic that ‘certainly I make experiments, but the unsuccessful ones are quietly hidden away and what I choose to publish is in my terms successful.’<sup>45</sup> Johnson worked hard to ensure that the hole was in the book, overcoming logistical headaches and printers delays.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, when he breaks down the structure of the book, either by demolishing it as it is being read or ‘walking in’ on it, he bolsters it at the same time. In *Memoirs* he maintains that:

When a future event must be revealed, I could (and can ; can you?) think of no way nearer to the truth and more effective than to cut a section through those pages intervening so that the event may be read in its place before the reader reaches that place.<sup>47</sup>

Again, Johnson prevents the reader from getting to the end of the sentence without picking holes in it. In this case, he makes a syntactical hole using parentheses. It has the same effect as the hole in *Albert Angelo* in miniature: he reaches forward, switching tenses, and makes the reader aware of the

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Realism, Truth, and Error in the Writing of B.S. Johnson’ *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), Available on *Oxford Online*: <<https://oxford-universitypressscholarship.com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/10.1093/oso/9780198857280.001.0001/oso-9780198857280-chapter-5>>

<sup>45</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 19

<sup>46</sup> See Coe for more details, p. 157.

<sup>47</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 17.

experience of reading as he addresses them directly. It has the startling effect of placing the reader in relation to the specificity of their copy of the novel and again the reader becomes aware of the ‘-itness’ of the text. Then we might think that Johnson has constructed his novel like one of the Smithsons’ ‘as found’ builds: a form with its structural workings put on display, a foregrounding of the ‘honesty’ of the materials, and pulling together something whole while retaining a feel for fragmentation. *Albert Angelo* is, as Imogen Cassels points out ‘a new-build novel for a new-build city, one which exposes the constitutive experiences of reading and writing’.<sup>48</sup> To this we can suggest that this ‘new-build’ might belong to the ‘as found’ tradition, drawing a ‘rough poetry’ out of the confused and power forces which are at work.’<sup>49</sup>

### Paranoia and Surprise

At the same time as we can read both the Smithsons’ and Johnson’s forms as brave and bold statements facing up to a fragmented reality, attempting to build into the future when it is impossible to accurately see into this future, it is also valuable to emphasise the ethical stakes that made them really want to get it *right*.

This is conveyed particularly effectively in Johnson’s classroom scenes. I have already elucidated some of the ways that the Smithsons interpreted the figure of the child as representing the future. They designed with play and family life in mind: their forms hoped to shape a particular modern citizen to use them. Yet Johnson’s representation is much more pessimistic. The games that Albert witnesses on the playground are far from the ‘creative’ kinds that I outlined in Chapter 2: they are neither the ritualistic, traditional games of the street or the improvised yet contained play of the adventure playground. Rather, they resemble more closely Barbary’s militarised ‘war games’ in the ruins. There is a gang of boys who call themselves the Corps and wear ex-army boots and drill each break, practising kicking in unison.<sup>50</sup> There is a genuine undercurrent of violence beneath them: “If we go on half-educating these kids any more,” he said suddenly to Terry, “then the violence will out. I’m sure they know they’re being cheated, that they’re being treated as subhuman beings. And the school *is* a microcosm of society as a whole.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Imogen Cassels, ‘B.S. Johnson’s Scaffolding: Form, the City, Cancer, Weeds’ *Modernist Cultures* 16.3 (2021). Available at <<https://doi.org/10.3366/mod.2021.0336>>.

<sup>49</sup> Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘The New Brutalism’ (1957), reprinted in *October* 136 (2011), p. 37. Available at: <[https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO\\_a\\_00038](https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00038)>.

<sup>50</sup> *AA*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

The classroom is a textual space where maximum contingency can be experienced. To perform this contingency, Johnson splits the page so as to better convey what a lesson is like, with the speech on the righthand side of the page in italics, with the teacher's thoughts on the left. The reader cannot digest both at once but once they have read both sides they will have seen that they are simultaneous. In a geology lesson Albert passes around a chunk of Irish gneiss, combatting excessing bolshy interruptions and providing a meta-commentary on his own mistakes:

No? Well, next time  
you do go out of London  
keep your eyes open for  
quarries. Anyway, when you  
look at the country you see  
that most of it is covered  
with grass and soil. But  
this is only a thin topcoat,  
like the skin on a rice-  
pudding, say, while under-  
neath lies rock, solid rock.  
— Give me that rice-  
pudding rock, daddy-o.

*Quick enough when they  
want to be. Then the teach-  
ing has been at fault. Mine  
must not be.*

Right, joke over.

The lesson is staged as a war between teacher and students. Albert is all too aware that they are beyond his intervention and, crucially, on the rise while he is on the wane. He is anxious about what impact his impulsive actions will have in the long run. He slides between urges to hit them ('I'll get that fucking kid and beat... No, I won't') and a 'progressive', liberal conscience and a guilty fear that 'all violence rebounds on society'.<sup>53</sup> Considering that the death Johnson finally selects for the fictional Albert is at the hands of his class who have already driven a former teacher to suicide, both sides of some of the most influential pedagogical debates are shown to fall short:

When I came up here I used to think I was at least a fairly competent teacher, even if I was certainly not a dedicated or inspired one. But the frightening thing here is that any sort of punishment has failed a deterrent: whatever you do to them doesn't stop them doing what they want to do, again and again. I hit them on the head with my knuckles as much to relieve my feelings as to try to stop them shouting or to make them pay attention. [...] I know that the standard answer is to treat them with lovingkindness, but you try it, mate, I've not got that much lovingkindness.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> AA, p. 73.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Albert's conflicted feelings of disillusionment towards teaching resonate with the account given by Laura Tisdall in her recent study *A Progressive Education*.<sup>55</sup> Tisdall argues that progressiveness received conservative backlash in the profession. She describes how there was an anxiety around the devaluing of teaching because of the emergency teacher training programme put into place after the War. Some teachers felt that this 'softened' the requirements for career progression, therefore undermining authority and eroding discipline. In addition to this, progressiveness was often feminised, posing a threat to the masculinity of some male teachers. Advice manuals for new teachers capture this anxiety about maintaining 'peace' in the classroom by explicitly drawing on the language of warfare to describe the pupil-staff relationships in the secondary modern school. In *Teaching Without Tears* (1961), for example, R. I. Bowley wrote that 'the teacher who ignores the pellet whizzing across the room might just as well give the signal to open fire,' and that 'surprise is as effective in the classroom as on the battlefield.'<sup>56</sup>

Johnson is no doubt exaggerating Albert's cynicism to parody authoritarianism. However, the child-centred model of teaching is satirised even more comprehensively. As David Leon Higdon argues, *Albert Angelo* is a direct reply to, and aggressive subversion of, E. R. Braithwaite's sentimental and optimistic *To Sir, With Love* (1959).<sup>57</sup> This novel is based on Braithwaite's autobiographical experience as a former RAF engineer from Guyana (governed as British Guiana), who, after being demobilised is refused physics and engineering jobs in London because of racist discrimination, finds work as a supply teacher in nearby Stepney Green.<sup>58</sup> The flattening over-generalisations of Braithwaite's traditional realism is tantamount to lying: 'I was reading this novel recently about a teacher in the east end who won over kids by love and kindness, morality and honesty, against tremendous odds—talk about sentiment and wish-fulfilment!'<sup>59</sup> In this framing, to believe in 'lovingkindness' is to throw away morality and honesty. This corroborates the unsettling idea that an honest portrait of schooling is one that shines a light on *violence* — that their violent behaviour is somehow a *true* expression of the underlying deeply unfair structural inequality:

Somehow they're behaving more like human beings than we are. It's the authority which is wrong, not those it's forced upon. People like the bloody Head and this inspector who came yesterday. She came into my class just as I'd got them under, which takes about ten minutes,

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<sup>55</sup> Laura Tisdall, *A Progressive Education? How Childhood Changed in Mid-Twentieth Century English and Welsh Schools* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Tisdall, p. 208.

<sup>57</sup> David Leon Higdon, 'B.S. Johnson's Albert Angelo as a Postmodern Counterbook' *The B.S. Johnson Journal: Summer 2014: The Issue with Institutions* edited by J. Darlington, M. Cooper, M. Seddon, P. Tew, K Zouaoui, pp. 5-46.

<sup>58</sup> E. R. Braithwaite, *To Sir, With Love* (London: Random House, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> *AA*, p. 130.

and after a bit she asked me if she could take over. [...] ‘You’re too tense, all of you, she says. ‘Relax, look, go floppy, like this, go floppy.’ My class went floppy all right, all over the place, and the noise! She just walked out after a few minutes, the cow, and I had to go round calming them down with my special fore knuckle headrap.<sup>60</sup>

In a way, there is a nihilism in Johnson’s parody at play, a suspicion that any attempts to buffer against the future have already failed, that it is already too late and violence threatens to burst through the surface of everyday life at any time.

His exasperation is levelled at the broad official institution of teaching, arguing that welfare state government policy has misunderstood what an education would actually consist of. This is staged as a debate between Mr Albert and another teacher, Miss Crossthwaite:

Proposition: That These Children’s Speech is Bad.

For the Proposition: Miss Crossthwaite.

Against the Proposition: Mr. Albert.

The offence to Miss Crosswaithe’s lovely ears, Mr. Albert suggested, came about because these children were not speaking the same as she spoke herself, these children were not imposing the same patterns on their worlds as she imposed on hers [...] As a teacher, he would point out to children that if they chose to move into other social contexts then they would probably not find acceptance unless they conformed to the speech conventions of the new one, accent being generally the easiest way of determining class origin: but he would never attempt to ‘correct’ children’s speech provided they were making themselves clear to him.<sup>61</sup>

Johnson, Philip Tew argues, has an affinity with these children, as the text absorbs alterity to demonstrate that Albert is also an outsider to the welfare state: that by refusing to capitulate to a sentimentalised teaching narrative, he is doing justice to the children that have been failed. The novel is:

–Didactic, too, social comment on teaching, to draw attention to, to improve: but with less hope, for if the government wanted better education it could be provided easily enough, so I must conclude, again, that they specifically want to majority of children to be only partially educated.<sup>62</sup>

In Tew’s opinion, *Albert Angelo* is a postcolonial text that should be praised for its confrontation of middle-class white squeamishness: ‘one strand of this white, working-class, football-supporting intellectual was an awareness of the realities, issues and aesthetic implications of imperialism and the

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>61</sup> *AA.*, pp. 138-139.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, sp. 176

postcolonial period. He argues that in this novel there is a ‘precursor to Homi K. Bhaba’s idea that ‘terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively.’”<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, this is a valid argument. However, in my view it is in Johnson’s treatment of race and its intersections with class that we can find some of the places that his commitment to exposing truth and honesty are at their weakest. It is in a way a powerful argument against Johnson designed a ‘specially-designed type-character’ deployed to draw ‘attention to physical descriptions which I believe tend to be skipped, do not penetrate.’ Tew argues this ‘naming’ disrupts oppressive hegemony. Yet this ‘special symbol’ has the effect of reducing his class to a series of discrete clauses that accumulate to create an indistinguishable blanket impression of racialised filth. Examples include: ‘Potato face, potential boxer’s, wide eyes, retroussé nose, wellblack hair, blue pullover’; ‘eyes narrowly, skin very white, hands just like trotters and dirty, nicotine stained’; ‘eyes like grapes, mouth a melon segment’; ‘blacker than you would think possible, starred by teeth white as the weathered face of portland stone, eyes brown as Brazil nuts.’<sup>64</sup> These suspend the reader at surface level: the reader gets *stuck* here.

This is reminiscent of Johnson’s ‘truth-telling’ in another one of his representations of working class children in London. For *Street Children*, Johnson worked with Julia Trevelyan Oman on a picture book. Oman, who was working for the BBC at the time as a set designer, built up a folder of photographs of working-class immigrant children playing in the street. Johnson provided the captions, adamant that he knew how the children thought and felt because he had been one of those children. The first caption in the book alongside a photo of a small boy with a dummy in his mouth is ventriloquised as follows:

They don’t have to tell me about this human condition: I’m in it. They don’t have to tell me what life’s about, because I know already, and it’s about hardness. Hardness and being on my own, quite on my own. You understand that much right from the beginning, from the first time the pavement comes up and hits you, from the first time you look round for someone you expected to be there and they aren’t. Oh, I know you can get close to people, but that’s not the same. In the end you’re just on your own.

But that’s not the point. The point is that you have to go on living in it, life, and not just put up with it, either, but let it see that it doesn’t matter to you. That you’re going to go on living however many times thing come up and knock you flat, however many people aren’t there when you expected them to be.

So they don’t have to tell me about it: I’m in it, right in it. You just have to go on.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Philip Tew, ‘Otherness, Post-Coloniality and Pedagogy in B.S. Johnson’s *Albert Angelo* and *See the Old Lady Differently*’ in P. Tew and G. White (eds.), *Re-reading B.S. Johnson* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 202-219; p. 12 of this volume.

<sup>64</sup> *AA*, p. 31; 70; 77.

<sup>65</sup> Extract from *Street Children* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964) quoted in Coe, p. 142.

The truth of the ‘human condition’, for Johnson, is a nihilistic one and the reader is faced with the same feeling of being confronted with a core belief that has been universalised. The ‘truths’ that Johnson works hard to expose as the descriptive ‘stuff’ of reality, the blocks or ‘honest’ materials from which a book should be built up are mired in Johnson’s own psychological self. Furthermore, Johnson’s truth-telling is often haunted by the spectre of failure before he has even tried, so he tries really hard to overdetermine meaning: what Jordan referred to as his ‘affectionate’ but ‘over-firm’ grip on the capricious details of experience. His narrative strategies might be thought of, then, as a form of paranoid writing. Thinking back to Johnson’s frustrated admission that ‘architecture is just not poetry’, this outburst can be read as a way to make sure that he will have no bad surprises: that he has already anticipated every bad outcome that might turn out to be true. This narrative strategy is elucidated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s idea of paranoid reading.<sup>66</sup> Here Sedgwick explains how paranoia is characterised ‘by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge, per se—knowledge in the form of exposure.’<sup>67</sup> Someone who is not paranoid does not place such an emphasis on having certainty: often what paranoia tries too hard to ‘expose’ is barely concealed in the first place:

That paranoia is anticipatory is clear from every account and theory of the phenomenon. The first imperative of paranoia is ‘there must be no bad surprises’, and indeed, the aversion to surprise seems to be what cements the intimacy between paranoia and knowledge, per se, including both epistemophilia and skepticism. D.A. Miller notes in *The Novel and the Police*, “Surprise is precisely what the paranoid seeks to eliminate, but it is also what, in the event, he survives as a frightening incentive: he can never be paranoid enough.”<sup>68</sup>

Being paranoid involves being one step ahead of bad news: it requires that the bad news must already be known as learning about the possibility of a bad surprise would itself be a surprise. Anxious vigilance as to the contents of the future generate a paradoxical relationship to temporality that burrows backwards and forwards: which indeed is what happens with the hole as it literally brings the future closer. Christopher Marlowe’s death, fixed in its place, becomes an omen, repelling chance and guarding against the contingent. In his biography of Johnson, Jonathan Coe detailed Johnson’s narcissistic identification with Marlowe, a curious belief that ‘grew so strong he became convinced he was going to die, like the playwright, at the age of twenty-nine.’<sup>69</sup> By putting it in print, he turns it into a kind of test with a correlation to his real life. With his later surprise ‘disintegration’, however, he again

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<sup>66</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2013), p. 56.

does not hang around to find out whether the reader ‘gets’ his experiment, exposing the ‘behind-the-scenes’ theoretical scaffolding to spell out what he is doing:

The novel must be a vehicle for conveying truth, and to this end every device and technique of the printer’s art must be at the command of the writer: hence the future-seeing holes, for instance, as much to draw attention to the possibilities as to make my point about death and poetry.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, it is easy to evaluate the success of the hole, or the novel, now, with considerable historical distance. We know now that for the most part neither books nor houses (to think back to the prototypical House of the Future – a doughnut shaped dwelling fixed around an empty space) have holes in them.<sup>71</sup> Yet *Albert Angelo* freezes a particular moment in time, inviting modern readers to consider that neither things have to look this way. Therefore, ‘experiment’ still remains a useful way of thinking about this text. It is not an ‘experiment’ in the sense that it comes before the permanent building or book but instead an experiment that gets made. From the contemporary moment, books and buildings can appear like unlinked pieces of planning, ‘lost futures’ from another time. Yet it is clear that Johnson sees that the hole might prompt more typographical experiments: he wanted to ‘draw attention to the possibilities’, prompting other writers to pick up the baton of literary experiment.

### ‘Clapped out’ forms

Literary forms do become exhausted, clapped out, as well. Look at what happened to five-act blank verse drama by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth and Tennyson all wrote blank-verse, quasi-Elizabethan plays; and all of them without exception are resounding failures. They are not so because the men who wrote them were inferior poets, but because the form was finished, exhausted, and everything that could be done with it had been done too many times already.<sup>72</sup>

‘Clapped out’ tells a story of shared use— this form has slid into obsolescence not because of their authors’ lack of talent but through over-use, so that form takes on a material quality. Form is something that can be used up like a consumer durable. We can also hear echoes of audience applause: applause that might be heard in the auditorium of a theatre or a public arts centre.

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<sup>70</sup> *AA*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the Smithson’s 1968 book campaigning to save the Euston Arch from demolition, for example, designed both as a memorial and a protest, makes a similar typographical experiment. A limited edition was produced with a spiral binding: ‘When a real catastrophe travels round and round in one’s bones, it is time to invent the spiralling book—obviously enough spiral bound—each page an agonising reflection pang, all continuous, round and round and round.’ *The Euston Arch and the Growth of London, Midland and Scottish Railway* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), no page numbers.

<sup>72</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 13.

For Johnson, this is not just an anxiety about being too avant-garde and ahead of his time (in *Memoirs* he reveals that the Australian embassy seized *Albert Angelo* and would not release it until they had been shown the obscenities which (they were convinced) had been excised).<sup>73</sup> It is also an anxiety about being too *late*, that everything worth doing has been done before. In 1967, Johnson wrote an unpublished piece called ‘Experimental British Writing’. Here Johnson grouped a loose range of writers (Christine Brooke-Rose, Alan Burns, Maureen Duffy, Rayner Heppenstall) who all agreed that the novel was ‘an evolving form in which there is no point whatsoever in doing something that has been done before’ but at the same time their ‘greatest debt is owed to James Joyce, of course.’<sup>74</sup> Their task was to ‘keep the legacy alive by rejecting anything that stands for modernism, by ‘evolving’ the form ‘away from its key tenets’, absolving their debt to Joyce only by deviating from him. This is a ‘proleptic anxiety that derives from its putative lateness. As much as modernism wants to move forward, it never escapes the anxiety that drives the search.’<sup>75</sup> Johnson cannot know for sure whether he has achieved his generation’s *Ulysses* or whether he has ‘failed’ by his own standards. He might not even know when he is dead:

Luke said: Won’t anyone ever build your buildings, then?

Albert said: Oh yes, one day they’ll all be built, I know.

Joseph said: When you’re dead, like.

Luke said: Like poets, after they’re dead.

Albert said: Like poets, just.

Luke said: Fucking lot of good that is, mate, I mean when you’re dead you’re fucking dead, aren’t you?

Albert said: No.<sup>76</sup>

This ‘afterlife’ depends on the public: the ‘users’ of the building – which brings us squarely back to the question of inhabitation and to the final connection that I want to draw out between the Smithsons’ practice and Johnson’s. I have outlined some of the key ways that both attempted to manage the contingencies of the future. Instead of suppressing them, they attempted to incorporate them into their forms, anticipating how a future user would spend time in their works. This, however, came with its own set of anxieties.

In 1969, Johnson realised his long held aspiration to make a film about the Smithsons. Airing on the BBC in 1970, this 25 minute documentary ‘The Smithsons on Housing’ was an opportunity for the

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<sup>73</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 31.

<sup>74</sup> This piece is discussed substantially in Julia Jordan’s chapter ‘Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde Renaissance’, *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction Since 1945* (ed.) David James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Available online at: <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCO9781139628754>>

<sup>75</sup> Lecia Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and the Politics of Consolation* (New York: Fordham, 2011), pp. 5-6.

<sup>76</sup> *AA*, p. 13.

architects to communicate the ideas behind Robin Hood Gardens, which was under construction.<sup>77</sup> The film is considered responsible for effectively curtailing Johnson's film career and was widely panned at the time. It is often invoked as evidence that the Smithsons were unsympathetic and eccentric. Coe, for instance, points to the 'eerie atmosphere' of the film, which he argues is the result of their unsettling camera presence and manner more than simply being 'a question of hindsight – of knowing that the brave housing project which these two theorists discuss with such intellectual fervour would come to be regarded, by many, as a social and architectural disaster.'<sup>78</sup> To those who are familiar with the eventual fate of Robin Hood Gardens, the footage of the building site looks more like demolition than construction. What is peculiar is that the documentary also seems to exist in a strange tense of hindsight in advance. Just like *Albert Angelo*, the script is hedged with doubts. The Smithsons speak about Robin Hood Gardens as if disappointedly scolding an unruly child: 'Why bother to make a quality object if they are just going to smash it up: why not a load of rubbish like developer's blocks? Why rebuild at all?' This creates the impression that they are responding to the vandalism of the building—yet at the time of filming, it hadn't even been finished. Just as *Albert Angelo* is plagued with a defensive anxiety about having already failed, the Smithsons were asking 'what went wrong?':

Society at the moment asks architects to build these new homes for them – but I mean this may be really stupid – we may have to re-think the whole thing. It may be that we should only be asked to repair the roof and add the odd bathroom to the old industrial housing and just leave people where they are to smash it up in complete abandon and happiness so that nobody would have to worry about it anymore. You know, we might be asking people to live in a way which is stupid, they maybe just want to be left alone.<sup>79</sup>

There are a few ways of reading this. 'Smashed' feels like a caricature of violence. 'With complete abandon' smarts with the insult of being rejected – it is as if their building has been abandoned. They muse that they are not necessarily building for the first generation of inhabitants but in the hope that future generations might recognise the modernity of the building. In fact, they go as far as to ask that society protects the work of the 'makers' from the 'destroyers', with the implication of saving it for a more appreciative generation to come who might understand this imaginative, avant-garde way of living. They question how the makers might stay 'just ahead' of the inhabitants. This displays a remarkable lack of faith in their future tenants to inhabit the building in the ways that they were imagining. Speaking in '69, this is a long way from their earlier writings in the first flush of welfare state reconstruction (where they were addressing divides within the general broad school of

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<sup>77</sup> *The Smithsons on Housing*.

<sup>78</sup> Coe, p. 284.

<sup>79</sup> *The Smithsons on Housing*.

modernism), and the film is a disconcerting reminder of the larger cultural shift against social housing that was taking place.<sup>80</sup>

Yet we might also read this startling statement against the grain to find some redeeming comments. Both Johnson and the Smithsons' 'as found' methods in a way advocate for people to be able to flourish in place. Neither party ever claimed to be *utopian*: their forms are direct expressions of reality as they saw it, which was incomplete and fractured. They approach what they perceive to be the 'realities' of the situation and tried to do something with the tangle of contradictions and confusions of life, inequalities and faultlines they perceived as being worsened by the failed promises of the welfare state. This is a drastically different way of thinking about New Brutalism: that it might constitute an ethically motivated critique of dominant ideas about reconstruction. It is true that both Johnson and the Smithsons were atypical voices in these discussions: combative, contrarian, often paradoxical. Yet their particular attitude to the putting-together of forms paints a richer picture of the challenges faced by reconstruction Britain and the difficulties that architects and writers faced – both of seeing into this future, and then building into it, knowing that the fate of their work would depend on contingencies that they had not even thought of yet. The conclusion to this thesis will look ahead to some of the legacies and afterlives of the images of the future and the way they were inhabited by those who came after them.

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<sup>80</sup> This is a moment that is often symbolised by the gas explosion in the Ronan Point tower block in the nearby Clever Road estate in May 1968. See Crinson, p. 78; see also John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: the Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso Books, 2018).

## Conclusion

In an interview with Peter Smithson that was published in the year 2000, looking back on their 1956 House of the Future, Beatriz Colomina put it to Peter that although it looked forward, ‘it is also very dateable. You look at that house, and you understand the period in which it was made.’<sup>1</sup> It becomes an archaeological fragment. Smithson, in agreement, remembers the public’s reactions to the fashion designed for the inhabitants by Teddy Tinling, who dressed Wimbledon’s tennis players at the time. They wore:

FOR HIM.—A Superman space outfit of nylon sweats and tights with foam rubber fitted soles. FOR HER. — The Pixie look, a sort of nylon skirt with scalloped edge, and tights with high-heeled fitted soles.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, the Smithsons were adamant that the clothes ‘should not excite laughter’, that they should be glamorous and stylish. Yet news outlets such as *Model Housekeeping* reported that they ‘raised the most laughs’ of the Ideal Exhibition that year.<sup>3</sup> However, upon printing his own photographs that showed the ordinary people and the actors side by side, Smithson remarked that it was the *public* that looked ‘absolutely ridiculous’.<sup>4</sup> Looking back at past attempts at trend forecasting can elicit a range of reactions: from smug satisfaction to laughter. For Smithson, this is directed towards the public for being slow to ‘catch on’. Yet for others, it is the predictions themselves that seem ridiculous: quaintly passé or dangerously misguided. In the past decade, these 1950s and 1960s ‘fictions of inhabitation’ have become an intense site of discursive struggle and intellectual interest, as is evidenced by the current exhibition at the Barbican, ‘Postwar Modern: New Art in Britain 1945-1965’. The pictures of past predictions for the future continue to fascinate, reanimating this complex moment.

This PhD has laid the ground for moving away from reading built structures as the definitive place to understand the jostling aspirations that people had for the 1950s and 1960s. It demonstrates how inhabitation and accommodation were key questions that were being worked through in literature and film. Writers and film makers (as well as architects and planners) were engaged in imagining what kinds of lives people would live. Both were in a position to respond to the dreams and aspirations of the public as they manifested in the domain of the ordinary: in everyday acts of homemaking and daydreaming. Published books, films, essays, architectural structures, were all examples of experiments that got ‘built’: therefore, they are products of live tensions and they manage life as it was

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<sup>1</sup> Beatriz Colomina and Peter Smithson, ‘Friends of the Future: A Conversation with Peter Smithson’ *October* 94 (2000), pp. 3-30, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Risselada and van den Heuvel, *From the House of the Future to a House of Today*, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Colomina and Smithson.

being experienced as it met life as it was being imagined. In literature, particularly, these were experienced as a back-to-back collage: discourses of new saturated environments cramped by too much past. Similarly the Smithsons' 'speculative fictions' help us to inhabit a different thought-space where different visions of the future were on offer. This thesis brings together the glossy dreams and the scuffed realities.

In Chapter 1, I looked at representations of homemaking in realist texts alongside the templates projected at the Ideal Home Exhibition. Doing so, I examined one seductive picture of a labour-saving, House of the Future that could even be thrown away when it no longer fitted its inhabitants way of living. Plastic, far from being a lightning conductor for environmental catastrophe, was a medium that promised to 'throwaway' useless time and hard work. Yet the textures and the surfaces of the texts that I examined told a different story about how women experienced modernity: one of making do, covering up and patching over substandard living spaces. In Chapter 2, I considered the idea that 'home' and 'domesticity' might become restless and mobile: that texts register these competing aspirations. On the one hand, a dwelling space such as a caravan would allow its inhabitant to cast off the trappings of domesticity; on the other, there was an impulse to take family life on the road. These were tensions that were being worked out. In Chapter 3, I explored the comparisons between the writer B.S. Johnson and the Smithsons' practice and how they dealt with the contingencies of the future at a time when narrative progression had been disturbed by a historical appreciation of the chanciness and chaos of life in its totality. Both tried to predict how the future would be *used*: how the individual would inhabit the form. Overall, I have incorporated a rich seam of texts, bringing together a diverse selection of 'fictions' representing both the aspirational and the banal. In doing so, I have laid the groundwork for future research which might investigate the fate of modernism after Second World War, suggesting that it did not vanish but could be found percolating in interesting places such as the Ideal Home Exhibition, genre fiction and 'women's novels'. Indeed, although this project has primarily focused on the power of 'norms', there is also scope for more work on queerness and use as they come together in representations of the domestic.

Working with a view to interdisciplinarity, this thesis emphasises the ways that women were intensely engaged with questions of inhabitation and the modern home. Indeed, there is a great deal of scope to develop an interdisciplinary project that centres women's involvement in welfare state architecture and industrial design. This thesis could be taken as a blueprint for exploring the fictions of inhabitation that are imbued in their plans, 'paste-ups', scrapbooks and writings. Patrick Zamarian's recent *The Architectural Association in the Postwar Years* (2020) offers a place to start: the Architectural Association in Bedford Square, London, was one of two institutions that embraced the

pedagogical ideas of CIAM.<sup>5</sup> There is much to be explored about the social radicalism and social protest that emerged from this school, which included figures such as Florence Knoll (who put together a book of the kinds of fabrics that would furnish a ‘modernist universe’), Mary Crowley (whose work I discussed in Chapter 3) and her experimental prefabricated nursery school designed with Ernö Goldfinger, and architects Rosemary Stjernstedt, Judith Ledebøer and Ann MacEwen who worked for the housing authorities.

### **Re-reading the Ruins: Brutalist Afterlives**

This thesis hopes to expand the remit of ‘New Brutalism’ beyond a focus on the exterior. It de-centres concrete as its *defining* property and takes up an interest in the ephemeral and the transient instead. It argues that in contrast to reading concrete forms as the direct expression of the unfinished achievements and aspirations of the welfare state, they should be read as fragments forged during a time of intense instability and tentative experimentation. This challenges the appealing yet flawed idea that the welfare state was a fully integrated whole comprising of concrete modernism, mass housing and class identity: a neat alignment of utopian politics that found lucid expression in a brave and confrontational material. It demonstrates that the domestic was a site of intense renegotiation that acutely registered the instabilities of everyday life in mid-century Britain: that its representations are the perfect place to understand people’s jostling desires, fears and expectations. In turn it reinserts the domestic into discussions of these buildings. It shifts the emphasis on why they are considered important fragments. To better understand the contingency of the forms that emerged as examples of postwar making, this project makes interdisciplinary connections across literary scholarship and architectural and cultural history, which tends to suffer from a blind spot when it comes to the lives people actually lived—or wanted to live—inside these new forms. This thesis concludes, therefore, by assessing the legacies of this period.

It is a popular critical trope to read the 1950s and 1960s by their remains. In particular, we think about these postwar decades via lumps of concrete — by what has tangibly endured into the built environment. These ‘remains’ are both what is left and a reminder of what is gone. As buildings, many of them have endured, but they are almost always overdetermined, standing in not only for themselves but for something that has not come to be. For this reason, even when they are not lying in rubble, they are considered as ruins. For example, Owen Hatherley reads Brutalist buildings as fragments that point forwards as well as backwards; in this way they can induce nostalgia for a future

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Zamarian, *The Architectural Association in the Postwar Years* (London: Lund Humphries, 2020).

that never came to be, ‘a longing for the fragments of the half-hearted post-war attempt to build a new society, an attempt that lay in ruins by the time I was born.’<sup>6</sup> Ruins, Brian Dillon writes, ‘embody a set of temporal paradoxes. The ruined building is a remnant of, and portal into, the past; its decay a concrete reminder of the passage of time. At the same time, the ruin casts us forward in time; it predicts a future in which our present will slump into similar disrepair or fall victim to some unforeseeable calamity.’<sup>7</sup> He posits that ‘the cultural gaze that we turn on ruins is a way of loosening ourselves from the grip of punctual chronologies, setting ourselves adrift in time. Ruins are part of the long history of the fragment, but they are a fragment with a future; it will live on after us despite the fact that it reminds us too of a lost wholeness or perfection.’<sup>8</sup> Ruins under this gaze point to the future rather than the past, using the ‘ruined resources of the past to imagine, or reimagine, the future.’<sup>9</sup> As Hatherley writes in *Militant Modernism*:

There is another Modernism well worth rescuing from the dustbin of history and the blandishments of heritage. This book is written in the conviction that Left Modernisms of the 20th century continue to be useful: a potential index of ideas, successful or fail, tried or untried or broken on the wheel of the market or the state. Even in their ruined condition, they can still offer a sense of possibility which decades of being told ‘There is No Alternative’ has almost beaten out of us.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, he argues that the best argument for the existence and functionality of the Welfare State is that its fragments ‘still work pretty well in the present day, despite the depredations of Right to Buy, ‘decanting’, poor maintenance and unemployment.’<sup>11</sup> To him, one of the best arguments for the possibility of a social democracy is the fact that one came pretty damn close to being built between 1945 and 1979, despite its many flaws and omissions.<sup>12</sup> This past future registers a loss because it would have happened in our present had it been successful. Thus, we are also ruins of what could have been. As a society, we are invested in and fascinated them, particularly as the last glimpses of this ‘new society’ seem to be vanishing. Yet they remind us that they are an alternative, even if a ghostly one – they remind us that once there was a choice. Might there still be one now?

An obstacle to this resuscitation, Hatherley elucidates in his *Ministry of Nostalgia* (2016) is the popular picture of the welfare state that our culture draws. Postwar ‘austerity’ is a site of discursive struggle: the stories that we tell about it fit the needs of the present and they offer competing pictures

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<sup>6</sup> Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (Hants: Zero Books, 2009) p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Dillon, *Ruins: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Militant Modernism*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Owen Hatherley, *Ministry of Nostalgia* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

of the future. Hatherley's object of complaint is 'austerity nostalgia', which he characterises as the overlaying of a detached pick-and-mix assortment of past iconography over the present. At times, Hatherley wrote, 'this has been so pervasive that it felt as if parts of the country began to resemble a strange, dreamlike reconstruction of the 1940s and 1950s, reassembled in the wrong order.'<sup>13</sup>

Hatherley was describing a particular political moment: when the Coalition government of 2009/10 and the subsequent Conservative majority governments implemented austerity measures, cloaked in nostalgic rhetoric.

Much excellent scholarship has been done on this. Gargi Bhattacharyya argues that twenty-first century 'austerity' was presented as a 'time-limited campaign that mobilises the sense of crisis in order to institute some extreme and hitherto unexpected measures within a short period.'<sup>14</sup> The campaign of Conservative 'austerity' 'seeks to remake the terrain of the social in such a manner that previous agreements about equality and the reach of mutuality are under threat.'<sup>15</sup> The financial crisis, which was caused by property speculation and culminated in huge scale bailouts of the largest banks provided a backdrop for an ideological attack on the remainder of the public sphere: a sphere that had already been decimated by thirty years of neoliberalism. Her work pays attention to the deliberate techniques that have been deployed to unravel social bonds and to institutionalise despair: to normalise new levels of hardship and a lower standard of living. She makes the important statement that we should challenge the acceptance of a system where all need is rendered endlessly precarious and all claims are met with an attitude of institutionalised suspicion. It is via the banalities of bureaucratic procedures mediating between the state and the population – what must be proved, how it must be proved, and how often it must be proved – that the cruelties of contemporary austerity operate.<sup>16</sup> As Rebecca Bramall argues, such rhetoric gained traction because there had been a shift in public opinion towards the idea that public spending had got out of control.<sup>17</sup> Therefore the new austerity referred to a completely different set of ideals. Whereas postwar austerity had been framed as in the interest of a more egalitarian society and resulted in the construction of the welfare state with a comprehensive system of health care, state benefits, educational reforms, the guarantee of full employment, and a public housing program, the 'new' austerity set about destroying these.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ministry of Nostalgia*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Crisis, Austerity and Everyday Life: Living in a Time of Diminishing Expectations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Bramall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity: Past and Present in Austere Times* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

This was undoubtedly a flash point: a profoundly disconcerting political situation where the remaining fragments of the welfare state were made hyper-visible and fulsomely commemorated while they were being dismantled in plain view. Over ten years on, ‘austerity nostalgia’ has morphed into different permutations. Such is the agglomerative nature of nostalgia — collecting up attractive fragments of stories and objects from different historical moments and sticking them together to produce something contemporary. As Stuart Hall can remind us:

The meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever. This year’s radical slogan will be neutralised into next year’s fashion; the year after, it will be the object of profound cultural nostalgia. [...] The meaning of a cultural symbol is the social field in which it is incorporated, and practices with which it articulates and is made to resonate.<sup>18</sup>

The best way to describe the current ‘structure of feeling’ (Raymond Williams’s term to describe ‘how we come to agree on social or cultural conventions—the intuitive, pre-ideological sense a collective has that one version of the future is feasible or not’) is through a series of examples.<sup>19</sup> In my opinion, we can update the term ‘austerity nostalgia’ to something closer to ‘welfare state style’. ‘Welfare state style’ has been championed as a celebration of the appropriation of relics from the postwar period as individual assets. A parallel might be drawn between the criticisms of ‘avant-garde cosplay’: a literary trend for domesticating the lives of radical women (who did not associate themselves with the domestic) by enmeshing them with cultural biography. In Lara Feigel’s biography of Doris Lessing, for example, *Free Woman: Life, Liberation and Doris Lessing*, Feigel concludes that probably, given the opportunity, Lessing would have opted for a cosy and comfortable life resembling Feigel’s own.<sup>20</sup> Olivia Laing’s twenty-first century version of Kathy Acker, as told in *Crudo* plans her wedding and eats plum-cardamom gelato.<sup>21</sup> Welfare state style is the postwar turned into leisure activity and as an object of luxury consumption. The recent *A Guide to Modernism in Metro-Land* by Joshua Abbott is pitched as ‘an essential *vade mecum* for those whose idea of bliss is pottering about the north-western suburbs [of London].’<sup>22</sup> It is in the squidgy pastel modernism of Assemble’s popular ‘The Brutalist Playground’ exhibition, with replica concrete playground apparatus reconstructed in foam and to be climbed on by visitors. It is the stationery shop Present and Correct’s annual modernist gingerbread house competition, which once featured a Trellick Tower studded with jelly diamonds. Other cultural commentators have remarked on this trend. Louise Benson, for instance, describes this trend as

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing “The Popular”’, *People’s History and Socialist Theory* ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 2016), pp. 227-240, p. 235.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>20</sup> Lara Feigel, *Free Woman: Life, Liberation and Doris Lessing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Olivia Laing, *Crudo* (London: Picador, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Joshua Abbott, *A Guide to Modernism in Metro-Land* (London: Unbound, 2020)

‘Middle Class Modernism’ and can be found in the stacking school chairs found in buzzy restaurants that describe their cuisine as ‘Modern British’, coffee table books on Brutalism and Bauhaus in hotel lobbies, and a ‘Quaker-like’ reverence for enamel kitchenware.’<sup>23</sup> What Benson points to is the sharpness and smugness of *gentrification*. Benson points out that this is a form of conspicuous consumption that masquerades as thriftiness as a ‘back to basics’ aesthetic requires capital.

The liveness of the period is obscured by many of ‘middle-class modernism’s representations of Brutalism which have emerged as an offshoot of ruin-writing. For instance, Barnabas Calder’s *Raw Concrete*, from the offset, makes a distinction between those who celebrate Brutalism as a proxy for the unfinished achievements and aspirations of the Welfare State, and those whose aesthetic appreciation is apolitical.<sup>24</sup> To do so, he narrates an individual story of artistic awakening by describing a relationship between person and edifice. He protests that he is purely an ‘enthusiast for concrete’ and therefore will not be ‘taking Brutalist architecture as a proxy for anything, either blameworthy or admirable, not a set of clever ideas on drawing boards.’<sup>25</sup> Yet the effort to which he goes to produce this separation suggests that this is neither an intuitive nor worthwhile endeavour. Calder opens with a typical ‘origin’ story where he recounts his conversion to Brutalism. As Hatherley (who goes unnamed by Calder but is plausibly his foil) notes, ‘almost every book about Brutalism not by an architect has an element of the Bildungsroman, starting out with the moment that the author in his (it’s almost always his) youth first became aware of the style.’<sup>26</sup> Yet Calder’s is not a catalytic ‘Proustian encounter between boy and béton brut.’<sup>27</sup> Rather, he recounts the fear that he felt the first time he saw Ernő Goldfinger’s Trellick Tower (completed in 1972), having grown up in a ‘comfortable’ Edwardian suburb of London where:

Concrete architecture represented everything which was frightening and other: urban motorways, stinking, rowdy and flanked by decaying buildings; reeking underpasses seemed to have been expressly kinked to maximise the number of corners round which imaginary psychopaths could cluster; vast impersonal buildings giving no indication of what was done within them; and above all council estates on whose walkways and deserts of patchy grass nameless but horrible crimes probably took place almost constantly.<sup>28</sup>

A generous interpretation, as is offered by Nicholas Thoburn in his reading of the Smithsons’ architecture as an architecture of fragments, takes this passage as a ventriloquising of a familiar

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<sup>23</sup> Louise Benson, ‘How Middle Class Modernism Took Over the World’, *Elephant Magazine* (2020) <<https://elephant.art/how-middle-class-modernism-took-over-the-world-07092020/>>.

<sup>24</sup> Barnabas Calder, *Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism* (Penguin: London, 2016), eBook.

<sup>25</sup> Calder.

<sup>26</sup> Owen Hatherley, ‘Strange, Angry Objects’, *The London Review of Books*, 38.22 (2016).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Calder.

middle-class panic that he attributes to the previous generation's mourning for the mass demolition of Britain's Victorian and Georgian architecture in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>29</sup> It also echoes David Cameron's statement in 2016 that 'in the worst estates [...] you're confronted by concrete slabs dropped from on high, brutal high-rise towers and dark alleyways that are a gift to criminals and drug dealers.'<sup>30</sup> Yet Calder's self-mockery, Thoburn points out, 'serve less as a self-critique than as *palliative* for the enduring sense of unease that class presents to this new domain of middle-class pleasure.'<sup>31</sup> Calder works hard to fabricate a separation between class and form. He attempts to flip from one binary to another – the psychopaths must be shown to be 'imaginary' in order that the locale be considered salvageable. The actual people (who are 'frightening and other' to the author) are erased from the picture completely because they would complicate it too much. Indeed, the above passage is completely depopulated ('deserts of patchy grass') and crime is attached to place. 'Horrible crimes' and 'patchy grass' are made weirdly equivalent and presented as aesthetic description rather than social phenomena.

This has the effect of both rendering the concrete itself as either something that working class residents should faux-paternalistically be 'saved' from or that should be salvaged from unappreciative inhabitants and repurposed. It is the image of stigmatised 'concrete monstrosity' that constitutes the violent party. Yet as the 'concrete monstrosity' is demolished, it takes the council estate with it, without objection from those deploying this trope. Thus we can reasonably infer that concrete does the work of disguising the real object of hostility: the working-class estate. Brutality slips from form to residents and back again: we infer that it is the inhabitants that change the building through their proximity to it. Calder's rehabilitation of concrete as a material as he learned 'over time' to 'love the subtle concrete finishes, to decode from the surface appearance how buildings had been made' disappears social relations even further. Take, for instance, his treatment of the privatisation of Balfron Tower, the Brutalist east London council estate also designed by Goldfinger. He presents a similarly static picture of class. He briefly laments that the block is being refurbished by Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association for private sale, then shrugs it off 'as some kind of natural urban ecology, wherein the parties involved—the housing association that evicts the tenants to sell of the estate, the developer who profits, the artists who assist in its image-cleanse—all perform

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Thoburn, 'Concrete and council housing: the class architecture of Brutalism 'as found' at Robin Hood Gardens', *City* 22.5-6 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2018.1549203>>.

<sup>30</sup> Colin Davies, 'David Cameron Plans to 'Blitz' Poverty by Demolishing UK's Worst Sink Estates.' *The Guardian* (2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jan/09/david-cameron-vows-to-blitz-poverty-by-demolishing-uks-worst-sink-estates>>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

their allotted role.’<sup>32</sup> He concludes, ‘it would be odd if each group did not do what it was doing.’<sup>33</sup> This description, claiming political neutrality, belies a pastoral view of class and naturalises inequality, reconciling each party here. John Grindrod’s *How to Love Brutalism* offers a similarly apolitical explanation for Brutalism’s rise in popularity.<sup>34</sup> He attributes it to the ‘emergence of both the smartphone camera (the shy brutalist’s enabler) and social media (providing more motivation to take more photos).’<sup>35</sup> In tandem, they have:

Broken a taboo around appreciating and photographing raw concrete buildings — secretly at first, and now ever more openly. Rather than unavoidably parading your interest, you could instead draw it to the attention of likeminded ‘brutalistas’ across the globe, aided by the magic of social media hashtags and geolocation.<sup>36</sup>

Again, there is probably a degree of humorous self-deprecation here, but this draws attention to another facet of this trend: its status as a kind of subcultural, edgy position. Concrete has been reclaimed in part because of its supposed sexy severity. This is underpinned by gendered discourse in architectural history. As Francesca Hughes has written, ‘there is a grand tradition of the figuration of the female body as container, as vase, intimately tied to the figuration of the earth as female body, as receptacle. This points towards both creation and the creation of (other) continuers, i.e. architecture (which is then also figured as female, a container).’<sup>37</sup> Throughout architectural history, the relationship of muse to artist or maker (in which we can include writer) is one that provides a safe house for the category of gender (and by the same turn, sexuality). This is just as true of Brutalism. There are examples spanning some of the most prolific authors writing on the postwar built environment that reproduce some of architecture’s most unimaginative sexist tropes. We can detect this legacy in the limited, clichéd static invocations of women that appear in Brutalist ruin-writing. Christopher Beanland writes of the Hayward Gallery at South Bank ‘although the material is tough, this machine-age aesthetic could be quite feminine [...] It lures you in but you’ll never understand it.’<sup>38</sup> Owen Hatherley describes the Barbican in the following terms:

Three utterly enormous towers, the largest residential buildings in Europe at the time: curves and spikes, carrying excitement and a hint of fear - and lower but no less fierce blocks curving round some showpiece lakes, linked by a series of seemingly endless walkways, under and overpasses and Smithsonian streets in the sky. Rather than intimidating and bleak, the Barbican is as attractive and mysterious as a J.G. Ballard heroine.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Calder.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> John Grindrod, *How to Love Brutalism* (London: Batsford, 2018), eBook.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘The Death and Life of Brutalism’.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Francesca Hughes, *The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Beanland, ‘A Concrete Future’, *Observer Magazine*, 31 January 2016, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (Hants: Zero Books, 2009), p. 34.

These are just two choice examples, but in general you would not guess from a great deal of writing that real women had anything to do with the transformation of space in the 1950s and 1960s, or, indeed that men were invested in domesticity. This sentimental fetishisation of Brutalism's concrete bulk obfuscates the vision of inhabitation which centres the individual dweller inside the space.

This is also underscored by the ways that, if we do learn about what it is like to live inside these buildings, it is usually mediated through aspirational lifestyle fodder such as Stefi Orazi's *Modernist Estates: The Buildings and the People Who Live in Them* or Sarah Thompson's *Style Council: Inspirational Interiors in Ex-Council Homes*.<sup>40</sup> It is frustrating to read that flats in (for example) the Barbican or Golden Lane Estate, most of which are in private ownership, 'encourage open space with a sense of community and shared ownership, a diversity of typologies and design details, and construction quality that elevates the quotidian into something that remains highly desirable, despite its flaws.'<sup>41</sup> Writing in 1964, the sociologist Ruth Glass described how 'while planning and public enterprise have played a positive part in diminishing the outward differences between London's residential districts, *laissez faire* had played a part also, though in the long run a negative one.'<sup>42</sup> The market forces, running counter to state-run housing policy, encouraged the takeover of well-located neighbourhoods by the affluent, reversing decay but pricing out less wealthy people. At the time Glass was observing this, it was the:

shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences. Larger Victorian houses, downgraded in an earlier period—which were used as lodging houses or were otherwise in multiple occupation—have been upgraded once again. Nowadays, many of these houses are being sub-divided into costly flats or 'houselets' (in terms of the new real estate snob jargon). The current social status and value of such dwellings are frequently in inverse in relation to their size, and in any case enormously inflated by comparison with previous levels in their neighbourhoods. Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced, and the whole character of the district is changed.<sup>43</sup>

Michael Thompson, who had firsthand experience as a builder renovating these formerly derelict Victorian properties in Islington, concluded that value is not a fixed characteristic of things but is

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<sup>40</sup> Stefi Orazi, *Modernist Estates: The Buildings and the People Who Live in Them* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2015); Sarah Thompson, *Style Council: Inspirational Interiors in Ex-Council Homes* (London: Square Peg, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Bell, 'Stefi Orazi's Golden Lane Estate monograph reveals London's architectural and social history' *Wallpaper* (2022). Available at: <<https://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/golden-lane-estate-book-stefi-orazi-london>>.

<sup>42</sup> Ruth Glass, *Aspects of Change* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1964), p. xviii.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

intensely changeable depending on who it is in proximity to.<sup>44</sup> Houses, generally assumed to be durable deposits of capital, are shown to be subject to the same forces as, for example, a Bakelite ashtray:

A transient object, decreasing in value with time and use, eventually sinks into Rubbish—a timeless and valueless limbo... It lingers on, unnoticed and unloved, until perhaps one day it is transferred to the Durable category. This... has happened with many a run-down inner-city district, a rat-infested slum becomes part of Our Glorious Heritage.<sup>45</sup>

This is precisely what has happened with Brutalism and other previously unfashionable mid-century forms, as can be demonstrated by the dedicated estate agents *The Modern House*. Their spaciousness, (often) inner-city locations, attention to light and space is remarked upon as a boon: as a surprise bonus rather than a key feature.

This kind of nostalgia, which treats appropriates former welfare state assets for individual gain freezes the past as its own isolable and consumable unit, precluding it, as C. Nadia Seremetaki warns, ‘from any capacity for social transformation in the present, preventing the present from establishing a dynamic perceptual relation to its history.’<sup>46</sup> Fragments, taken as wholes, block a dynamic sense of the past as ‘unreconciled historical experience.’<sup>47</sup> Yet the stories that we tell about Brutalism matter. For many scholars of the ‘contemporary’, we orient ourselves towards postwar fantasies of upward social mobility, job security, political and social equality and durable intimacy, despite the precariousness of our lives. Lauren Berlant, for instance, worked to show how this diminishing sense of potential and security affects the forms we give to everyday life, describing it as ‘genre flailing’. ‘Genre flailing’ is:

A mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one’s confidence about how to move in it. We genre flail so we don’t fall through the cracks of affective noise into despair, suicide or psychosis. We improvise like crazy, where “like crazy” is a little too non-metaphorical. We see it in the first gasps of shock or disbelief, and in the last gasps of exhausted analogy. But it’s not always a wildly inventive action. When crisis is ordinary, flailing—throwing language and gesture and policy and interpretations at a thing to make it slow or make it stop—can be fabulously unimaginative, a litany of things to do, pay attention to, to stop saying, or to discipline or sanction.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>45</sup> Michael Thompson, ‘Time’s Square: deriving cultural theory from rubbish theory’, *Innovation* 16.4, pp. 319-330, p. 322.

<sup>46</sup> C. Nadia Seremetaki, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Genre Flailing’, *Capacious Journal* (2016). Available at: <<http://capaciousjournal.com/article/genre-flailing>>.

When Berlant writes about the search for ‘genre’ they are talking about sensing that the relation of the individual to the world is changing, but the rules for habitation and genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos’:

We like to imagine our life follows some kind of trajectory, like the plot of a novel, and that by recognising it, we might in turn, become its author. But often what we feel instead is a sense of precariousness—a gut level suspicion that hard work, thrift, and following the rules won’t give us control over the story, much less guarantee a happy ending. For all that, we keep on hoping, and that persuades us to keep on living.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to continue to expand our imagination of what life and work might look like in order to remake the social sphere. It is my hope that this thesis contributes to this project in a number of ways. By reanimating a sense of the mid-century’s transitional character, we can highlight the tensions and challenges that produced formal experiments. By splintering the ‘norms’ that still carry enormous importance, we will better be able to grasp the ways that they plumb the present. Was this not also a period of intense ‘genre flailing’ and struggle to make sense of a chaotic world? Do we not also see ‘dramas of adjustment’ play out in mid-century literature and film as competing narratives about what the future should look like chafed against each other?

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<sup>49</sup> Berlant quoted in Hua Hsu ‘Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety’ *The New Yorker* (2019). Available at <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/25/affect-theory-and-the-new-age-of-anxiety>>.

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