

Concrete Junglists

Crashing out of the 1980s the post-industrial cities of the Midlands and the North were again on their knees. The problem with the '80s boom was that it never reached the populous. Cast an eye backwards and think about Lancashire and Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and the West Midlands, it's not their image of excess that populates the imagination, it's the stockbrokers of Canary Wharf that characterise the unfettered financial cannonade. One way to easily grasp where the money went is to look at the construction sector – think about how many Northern cities have centres in the popularly diluted post-modernist style – almost none that I can call to mind and I've mooched tirelessly around the North.

Even more marked is the lack of investment in the inner suburbs of Northern cities during the 1980s. The last time that most of these places were developed was in the heroic period of British modernism, between the late 1950s and the early '70s. In Sheffield, the pioneering Park Hill broke the mould for social housing and was lauded the world over for its innovative socio-physical composition, clambering adeptly across the escarpment rising above the main railway station and providing commanding views of the city across the valley. Streets are supposed to be on the ground, but 'streets in the sky' had an aspirational ring to it that implies elevation, not just physically, but socially too.

For a short time, when local authorities provided almost all of our societal services, deck access, mass-housing schemes worked. They were maintained, they had residents associations, they had pubs, shops, post offices, schools, nurseries, social clubs - space for society. As the bite of the oil crisis and the restructuring of local government gripped and squeezed the nation's economy in the mid '70s, space for society dwindled and a manifestly malignant attitude to the maintenance of estates prevailed. The rise of individualism, coupled with the non-recovery of the North left inner suburbs to rot, literally.

In Hulme, Manchester, the Crescents were the place where these conditions festered and fermented. I use two terms here deliberately to try and imply both the negative and positive implications of the socio-economic situation effectively imposed on these sites and citizens. Cheap construction methods were prototypical, tested on the urban poor and, despite the emancipatory ambition of the architects, did anything but free people from the shackles of ill-health associated with unsanitary living. The bright white system buildings were roundly welcomed by politicians, the public and the press when they were new, but their shining glory was fast to fade as support was withdrawn and materials technically failed.

Families struggled to realise decent standards of living, seemingly abandoned in the concrete jungle and those that could, left. The demographic of the Crescents shifted and by the mid 1980s students, punks, the unemployed and the elderly formed more than a significant part of the population. The payment of rent was not routinely enforced and those that lived there had to sort of govern themselves. There was a rise in low-level crime, but a growth in creativity as the youth there by choice or necessity, or both, formed bands, started club

nights, practiced graffiti and partied. The now famous Kitchen was one such enterprise, actually situated in a series of flats that had been knocked together and where Manchester's Acid House scene would gestate.

Fast-forward to the early 1990s and the demolition of Hulme began with a spectacular pyrotechnic show by resident anarchists The Dogs of Heaven. Burning cars were launched from the rooftops, fires blazed and sound systems carried repetitive beats across the open space that was supposed to have been the park of the people. One by one the blocks were torn down. Elsewhere in the country illegal raves had reached gargantuan proportions – at Castlemorton an estimated 125,000 had gathered for a week-long party headed by the Spiral Tribe sound system and joined by a multitude of others. Travelling, living in a van and moving from site to site where others pitched up, had become a lifestyle choice. Hulme provided a good winter pitch where vans could be parked in relative security and empty flats squatted. The sound system culture sat comfortably with other perceptibly anti-social realities and the drawn out death of Hulme's modernist dream continued to support any form of subcultural expression.

The last remaining deck access block was Otterburn Close. It stood in splendid isolation in a grey desert of concrete rubble and had sucked in all those who remained in a last gasp of anarchic freedom, before the neo-conservatism of New Labour painted a hazy gloss on the common imagination and taste was neutralised by the rise of the information society. Techno, jungle, hip-hop and house all found their space here and found common ground in the most brutal of conditions. Parties were rife and almost continuous for a period. Flats lined with mylar foil, used to reflect the grow lights of cannabis farms, became dystopic discos. Old ambulances and other utility vehicles flanked the decaying blocks. The physical fabric was coated with layers of aerosol paint by Kelzo, Zeds, Elk, Shun, Arise, Demo and anyone who cared to travel to this proverbial playground. One particular weekend characterised all I have been trying to say here – the second Smear Graffiti Jam in 1996. The Desert Storm sound system played all weekend with local teenagers taking turns as MC, writers travelled from all over the country, breakers broke, car chassis were the dodgems at the fair and a zipline from the roof added extra thrills. In Al Baker's words, 'As Hulme shrank beneath waves of eviction and demolition formerly separate pockets of people were forced to meet'.

The ethic of this creative anarchy met the aesthetic of the modernist estate. Of course, with the popular rise of the term brutalism, it's easy to label these spaces as brutal and in some sense they were hard and unforgiving. But, brutalist was not common parlance in the mid 1990s and the ideas of association between the space and sounds existed only in the unuttered thoughts of a few. The sounds of the structured rhythm of percussive techno crossing from Detroit to Manchester and an appreciation of system buildings neatly coalesced in my own conception to be one and the same. The hard rhythmic structures of system buildings, their grids and order, were not unlike the visual music programming environments of Cubase on the Atari ST. The syncopated synths of analogue

production were like the perturbation by graffiti on the ordered fabric of the estates. To me this was *musique concrète* – no question.