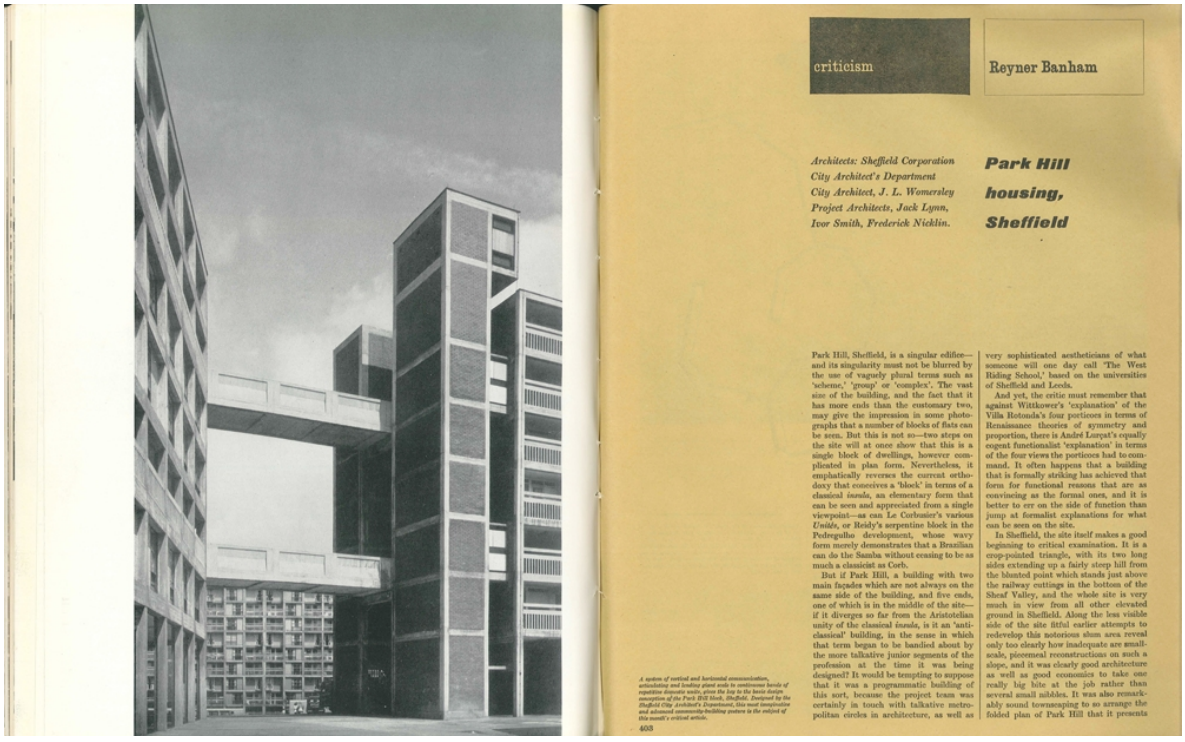
Reyner Banham on Park Hill, Sheffield, UK

3 DECEMBER 1961 **BY REYNER BANHAM ARCHIVE**



criticism

Reyner Banham

Architects: Sheffield Corporation City Architect's Department City Architect, J. L. Womersley Project Architects, Jack Lynn, Ivor Smith, Frederick Nicklin.

Park Hill housing, Sheffield

Park Hill, Sheffield, is a singular edifice—and its singularity must not be blurred by the use of vaguely plural terms such as 'scheme,' 'group' or 'complex'. The vast size of the building, and the fact that it has more ends than the customary two, may give the impression in some photographs that a number of blocks of flats can be seen. But this is not so—two steps on the site will at once show that this is a single block of dwellings, however complicated in plan form. Nevertheless, it emphatically reverses the current orthodoxy that conceives a 'block' in terms of a classical *insula*, an elementary form that can be seen and appreciated from a single viewpoint—as can Le Corbusier's various *Unités*, or Reidy's serpentine block in the Pedregulho development, whose wavy form merely demonstrates that a Brazilian can do the Samba without ceasing to be as much a classicist as Corb.

But if Park Hill, a building with two main façades which are not always on the same side of the building, and five ends, one of which is in the middle of the site—if it diverges so far from the Aristotelian unity of the classical *insula*, is it an 'anti-classical' building, in the sense in which that term began to be bandied about by the more talkative junior segments of the profession at the time it was being designed? It would be tempting to suppose that it was a programmatic building of this sort, because the project team was certainly in touch with talkative metropolitan circles in architecture, as well as very sophisticated aestheticians of what someone will one day call 'The West Riding School,' based on the universities of Sheffield and Leeds.

And yet, the critic must remember that against Wittkower's 'explanation' of the Villa Rotonda's four porticoes in terms of Renaissance theories of symmetry and proportion, there is André Lurçat's equally cogent functionalist 'explanation' in terms of the four views the porticoes had to command. It often happens that a building that is formally striking has achieved that form for functional reasons that are as convincing as the formal ones, and it is better to err on the side of function than jump at formalist explanations for what can be seen on the site.

In Sheffield, the site itself makes a good beginning to critical examination. It is a crop-pointed triangle, with its two long sides extending up a fairly steep hill from the blunted point which stands just above the railway cuttings in the bottom of the Sheaf Valley, and the whole site is very much in view from all other elevated ground in Sheffield. Along the less visible side of the site fitful earlier attempts to redevelop this notorious slum area reveal only too clearly how inadequate are small-scale, piecemeal reconstructions on such a slope, and it was clearly good architecture as well as good economics to take one really big bite at the job rather than several small nibbles. It was also remarkably sound townscaping to so arrange the folded plan of Park Hill that it presents

A system of vertical and horizontal communication, articulating and binding plant ends to continuous bands of repetitive dwelling units, gives the key to the basic design conception of the Park Hill block, Sheffield. Designed by the Sheffield City Architect's Department, this most imaginative and advanced community-building venture is the subject of this month's critical article.

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a continuous wall of building on the more visible side, and thus create a big single dominant form over an area that is visually irresolute when seen in long views across the valley—one of a number of points on which Park Hill seems able to challenge comparison with the well-known Cerro Piloto housing outside Caracas (cf. AR November 1958, page 338).

The decision to make the whole scheme one building (barring some shops and a small school) gives, obviously, a unity to the design, but 'unity' is a word that has taken a terrible beating of late, and it is worth while to see what lies behind this obviousness. Firstly, there is the unity of place, such as any large construction bestows on the area it dominates, but reinforced by the fact that quite a lot of ground is practically surrounded by the arms of Park Hill. Secondly, there is the unity of performance—at all points within the main building, the same kind of structural frame supports the same kind of residential function. This does not mean that there are no expansion joints or other structural variations where needed, nor does it mean that all the apartments are identical in accommodation and aspect. But it does mean that the general nature of the building is everywhere sufficiently alike for the visitor or inhabitant to notice it, so that at points ten minutes' walking time apart one is conscious of being in the same building.

The project team at some early stage in the design decided to let this general identity of use and structure set the pattern for the exterior, and this brings up the third unity, that of detailing. The regularity of external treatment was very heavily criticized in some quarters when the designs were first published because it failed to express the individual dwellings within the block*—from outside one can distinguish which floors are flats and which are maisonettes, but not how many bays a large or small apartment occupies along that floor. In front of the finished building this objection seems trifling, since the identity of dwellings is effectively established by the grouping of their front doors on the access side, and the project team were clearly right to go for unity and continuity of bay treatments, and for regularity of detailing throughout.

The detailing, too, has been attacked, though not in print. One must say, frankly, that some of it seems under-designed, and some of the junctions seem ill-considered—particularly where some non-repeating functional element, such as the additional external staircase in the corner of the shopping centre, has to be butted against the façade. But this, again, is a trifling objection because the scale of the detailing is trifling when compared with the scale of the block, which could clearly absorb downright bad detailing (which this emphatically is not) and survive. Furthermore, those who denounced the façade treatment as a compendium of current clichés when the design was first published must eat their words now, for the finished result seems remarkably free from fashiony touches, and is curiously dateless in its detailing. Again, some of these details seem entirely praiseworthy, notably the standard pre-cast balustrading in bay-wide units which, with its double top rail, is strong enough visually to stand up as a unit in the façade pattern, massive enough when viewed from inside the block to give a sense of security, yet not so lumpish as to block the view outwards too much.

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* Cf. Architectural Design, June, 1955, page 192.

Diagrammatic plan of the Park Hill layout—north is at the top of the page, and the ground falls in that direction (see 1, opposite). In this plan, the block itself is seen only in outline, and the very thick black line on one side of the block represents (to correct width to scale) a typical street deck, threading its way through all the arms of the block. The three junction points with their bridges are shown and the lifts and stairs at the block-ends and points of junction.

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1, Park Hill from the air, looking north-east toward the Sheaf Valley. The nearest limb of the building is of only four storeys—at the top left-hand corner of the picture it is fourteen.

2, a view, during construction, of the block as seen from the other side of the valley, showing its wall-like presentation toward the town.

Park Hill housing, Sheffield

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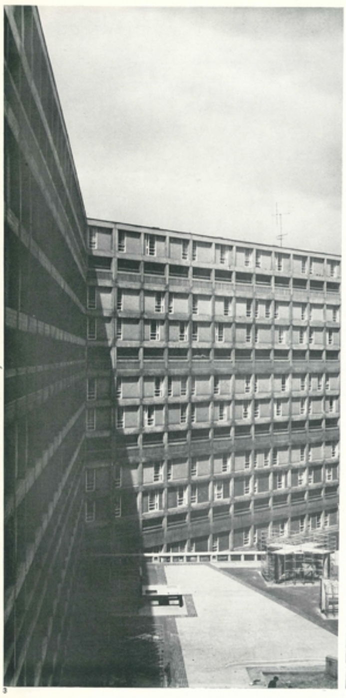
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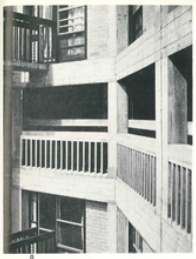
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3 (opposite), internal or 'courtyard' view of the deck side of the block—the small windows on this side serve the bedrooms of the apartments. In the foreground, one of the children's playgrounds at ground-level.

4, 5, 6, 7, four deckscapes at Park Hill: 4 is a point of transference, where the street-deck penetrates through to the other side of the block; the others show front-door details, the manner of handling bends, and typical uses (and users) of the decks.

8, exterior view at 4, showing typical external details in pre-cast and insitu concrete, metal and brick. The seemingly 'under-designed' quality of some elements is in contrast with the unassuming vigour of the concrete work.

9, external, or 'town' view of the block near the middle of the site—on this face at this point are living rooms and kitchens and their balconies as well as bedrooms on the upper floors of maisonettes.

10, internal townscape, looking towards one end of the block, from the portico underneath another part of the building—a view entirely framed in elements of Park Hill.

11, view over a deck bridge toward the vehicle lift in the facing block—the treatment is identically symmetrical at all three bridges.

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Park Hill housing, Sheffield

12, the most elaborate, and most southerly, bridging point, with three levels of decks spanning the interruption in the block. The Mondrianesque windscreens by the lifts are conspicuous in this view, as is the old school in the background, which is to be replaced by a new school on the same site.

13, the shopping centre at the north end of the site—none of the shops are under the block, others in the independent pavilions seen here.

14, 15, 16, Park Hill flow-sequence: 14, steps down to shopping-centre, with grass reinforced by concrete swirls at right, to accept the weight of fire-engines, etc.; 15, the main central path, which confines its way up the site from north to south; 16, the garden where a street-deck runs out to ground-level.

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But to return to the three unities (which, to say it again, are hardly those of Aristotle). Their effect together is more than the sum of the three. They combine in the specific unity of a particular building, Park Hill, so that when one looks out from some part of it and sees another of its limbs swinging across the view, the effect is like that of suddenly realizing that the railway lines on the other side of some valley in Switzerland are the same that one's own train has just traversed a few moments before. But the simile cuts closer; the chances are that the vantage point from which the other limb is viewed will be on one of Park Hill's much discussed street-decks, and that what one recognizes on the other side of the site is not merely another street-deck, but another part of the *same* street-deck, another part of the same built volume as the viewer himself occupies.

For the ultimate unity of Park Hill depends on the inviolate continuity of horizontal communications; the street-decks make it possible to walk to any other point on the same floor level without ever having to go down to ground and come up again. But these decks are more than glorified access balconies. Their width is sufficient to accommodate children's games and small wheeled vehicles for deliveries and furniture removals, they gather up all the entrances to flats and maisonettes, and tenants' addresses are quoted by a number on a particular named deck. Functionally and socially they are streets without the menace of through vehicular traffic, and a lively argument is developing, and will continue, about the social function in particular—whether it works, whether it is worth having—because here the scheme is certainly programmatic. It set out to create a certain kind of social relationship, snobbishly decried by the *TCPA Journal** as 'Matiness,' and this is one of the points by which it must ultimately be judged.

But by qualified social scientists, not by me. The business in hand here is to discuss its architectural qualities—qualities which have been somewhat obscured by the tendency of critics and polemicists to concentrate, so far, on the question of who invented street-decks in the first place. This matter (which will be discussed later) seems to be of marginal significance when compared to the feat of *building* them first, on this very grand scale, and with complete success and conviction—and not as a clipped-on gimmick but as something integrally part of the whole architectural conception.

An an access system, each deck serves a storey of flats below deck, and maisonettes at deck-level rising into the storey above, and each deck, except the highest, runs out to ground level at some point up the rise of the site—the roof-line is at the same level throughout the building, but the rise of the ground reduces the number of storeys from fourteen at the low end of the site to four at the top. But the deck system is more profoundly involved with the design of the apartments than this, since it is a rule, throughout the building, that living rooms shall have the preferred, sunward aspect, and the deck be on the other, bedroom side. Since the building changes direction several times, the deck, on almost as many occasions, has to change from one side of the block to the other—hence the observation that the building has two façades (public and private, so to speak) not always on the same side. But the logic of the situation also requires that the deck will change sides mainly at points where the regular rectilinear structure of the block has to be deformed to accommodate the bend, and thus the penetrations of the deck through the building are usually associated with a split-open version of the H-plan stair-duct that forms the main internal load-bearing member throughout the structure. As a result these penetrations are not just rectangular passages, but polygonal public places interrupting the regular run of the decks, and preparing the street-deck stroller for a change from an 'outside' view over the city to an 'inside' view into one of the interior green spaces of Park Hill, or vice versa. Thus, while the deck never offers grandiose perspectives, but keeps down to a domestic scale of views along its length, the act of walking along one is a serial scenic experience, punctuated by irregular spatial constrictions, that is continuously fascinating.

This system of minor architectural punctuations is itself interrupted by more emphatic punctuations—full stops and semi-colons, so to speak, among the commas. The full stops are clear and straightforward enough; at each of the five ends of the block the street-decks expand into small public places running the full width of the structure, serving as a landing for the escape stair and a 'bus-stop' for the lifts. These two vertical circulations are each housed in what appear from most ground-level views to be uninterrupted brick ducts standing side by side and effectively terminating the pattern of the façade. The semi-colons, however, are a different matter. At three points on each deck, the pedestrian, finding himself at an apparent full stop, will discover that a bridge leaps away between the two vertical ducts and connects to further extensions of the street-deck running to left and right beyond. Furthermore, he finds himself facing an exactly symmetrical composition, with a large service lift (for vehicles, etc.) exactly on the axis of the bridge.

These three points of intersection are identical on plan, all perfectly symmetrical with the three limbs meeting at angles of 112½°/135°/112½°. They arise so naturally from the general planning that their formality is not noticed at first, and I cannot see personally that the aesthetics of the whole scheme would be noticeably impaired if the three limbs met at any other combination of angles, provided they were obtuse. But symmetrical they are, and they make it clear that there must always have been some quantum of formalist intention from the very inception of the design.

Indeed, this intention was institutionally and administratively recognized in the retention of the Constructionist sculptor, John Forrester, as a kind of aesthetic consultant to the project team in the early stages, and many details, particularly of the façade treatment (relationship of planes of brick, concrete, etc.) were resolved with his advice. Purists will doubtless wince at the thought of an aesthetic consultant guiding the architect's hands in moments of indecision, but Forrester's presence on the project team at all reflects a most extraordinary broad-mindedness on the part of the city authorities who budgeted for him, and remarkable enterprise on the part of the city architect who employed him. After which it may seem both captious and ungracious to suggest that his presence was not everywhere beneficial, even though one also says that the most obvious evidences of his contribution — the Mondrianesque windscreens by the lift entrances—do less than justice to his capacities as a designer.

Nevertheless, at these three crucial points of intersection, I cannot help feeling that Forrester's presence may have involved the project team in rather *passé* Constructionist programmes of 'Integration of the Arts,' when they had much more creative and exciting possibilities at hand, arising from their own architectural intentions. The touch of formality at the intersections suggests that the crucial importance of these passages to the whole design was felt by the project team, but it is

Section through one three-storey layer of Park Hill, showing the maisonette, above, and the flat, below, wrapped round an street-deck which serves the front halls of both.

* August, 1951, page 235.

expressed by something else, by the bridges themselves. Viewed from the ground, or from other parts of the building, their visual importance is overwhelming. Surprising as it may seem, they assume complete architectural dominance over the vertical ducts of lifts and stairs, however powerful these may appear when they are not in visual competition with the bridges, and their dominance makes clear, as nothing else does, the horizontal continuity of the whole building. The functional reason for these bridges is to make clearance for service roads entering the site, but the effect is not of connections between independent blocks of flats; rather, one sees and feels a continuous building which at these points has been pared down to its bare essentials, to communications that are more basic to the whole design than even the structural skeleton.

Now the strength of this effect comes largely from the starkness of its expression —the first model had weather canopies over each bridge, with intermediate supports, and this, I am sure, would have muffed the whole effect. The reason why these plain concrete trough-beams are so immediately effective in conveying the idea of communicative continuity lies, in some way, in their visual relationship to the well-known photographs of the breakdown model of the Unité at Marseilles,* in which blocks representing the duplex apartments are shown being threaded *into* the frame, and *around* a cardboard duct, representing the *rue intérieure*, which projects from the end of the assembly in much the same way as do the deck bridges at Park Hill.

It seems unlikely that the project team simply took over a visual effect from this photograph, but the fact remains that they are members of a generation that has never recovered from the impact of the *Unité*, and, furthermore, the *idea* of the *rue intérieure*, borrowed from Corb, is one of the few influences that was admitted by Park Hill's defenders during the early disputes about who thought of it first.† These street-decks are *rues intérieures* in so far as they are within the frame of the block and partly wrapped round by the maisonettes, but in being at the side of the building and open to the air, they approximate to an English tradition that runs from the Chester Rows to the Stirling and Gowan housing in Preston, by way of many spec-built terraces of shops which have access decks at first floor level, over the sales area.

More immediately to the point, however, is a development visible among student designs in the very early Fifties, in which some form of continuous horizontal circulation at high levels, with public spaces at intersections, was more or less *de rigueur* in all projects for high-density housing, and was finally summed up in two of the unsuccessful entries in the Golden Lane competition: one by the Smithsons, by whom the term *street-deck* may have been coined, and another by Ivor Smith and Jack Lynn, which was instrumental in their being invited to join J. L. Womersley's then very young team at Sheffield to develop a street-deck scheme for a site there (not, originally, Park Hill).

Now, the desire to revise Corb, visible in all these projects, was part of a loosely anti-classicist movement that was to produce its most extreme manifestation in the Smithson's 'topological' project for Sheffield University as early as 1953, in which even more dramatic emphasis is laid on the exposition of circulation as the uniting factor of the design.* But it must be remembered that the existence of this movement only appears by hindsight from a decade later, that the terms 'un-classical' or 'anti-classical' were equally retrospective, and applied by some critics and some of the architects involved to explain what they thought had been done, rather than as slogans or tenets of faith while the designing was in progress. The Smithsons did not set out to be topological, though they seemed pleased enough to discover later that this was what they had been. It is to be doubted if the Park Hill project team set out to be anti-classical (the author can testify from first-hand, or first-ear, experience, that they were much more concerned with Constructionist Integration), and their design is not to be regarded as programmatic on that subject.

But against this, it must be noted that it is very conspicuously a child of its time—the hammer-headed lift towers standing away from the main structure are as much the indicator of a specific mental climate as was the Venetian window in its day. It represents a kind of building that a great many young architects in Britain in the early Fifties wanted to put up, and very few succeeded—the Market building in Sheffield, by Andrew Derbyshire, represents the same mood on a smaller scale, and Derbyshire, too, was in on the birth of the street-deck. Park Hill seems to represent one of those rare occasions when the intention to create a certain kind of architecture happens to encounter a programme and a site that can hardly be dealt with in any other way, and the result has the clarity that only arises when—as in the Villa Rotonda—aesthetic programme and functional opportunity meet and are instantly fused. But what Park Hill abundantly demonstrates is that there are other kinds of architectural clarity besides the Classical.

* *Le Corbusier 1910-1960*, page 154.

† *Architectural Design*, August 1955, page 7.

* Cf. THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW, December 1955, page 360.

Reyner Banham reports on one of the most imaginative and advanced community-building gestures of its day

Originally published in AR December 1961, this piece was republished online in September 2011

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discover that a bridge leaps away between the two vertical ducts and connects to further extensions of the street-deck running to left and right beyond. Furthermore, he finds himself facing an exactly symmetrical composition, with a large service lift (for vehicles, etc.) exactly on the axis of the bridge.

These three points of intersection are identical on plan, all perfectly symmetrical with the three limbs meeting at angles of 112 ½° / 135° / 112 ½ °. They arise so naturally from the general planning that their formality is not noticed at first, and I cannot see personally that the aesthetics of the whole scheme would be noticeably impaired if the three limbs met at any other combination of angles, provided they were obtuse.

But symmetrical they are, and they make it clear that there must always have been some quantum of formalist intention from the very inception of the design. Indeed, this intention was institutionally and administratively recognized in the retention of the Constructionist sculptor John Forrester, as a kind of aesthetic consultant to the project team in the early stages, and many details, particularly of the façade treatment (relationship of planes of brick, concrete, etc.) were resolved with his advice.

Purists will doubtless wince at the thought of an aesthetic consultant guiding the architect's hands in moments of indecision, but Forrester's presence on the project team at all reflects a most extraordinary broadmindedness on the part of the city authorities who

budgeted for him, and remarkable enterprise on the part of the city architect who employed him. After which it may seem both captious and ungracious to suggest that his presence was not everywhere beneficial, even though one also says that the most obvious evidences of his contribution - the Mondriaanesque windscreens by the lift entrances - do less than justice to his capacities as a designer.

Nevertheless, at these three crucial points of intersection, I cannot help feeling that Forrester's presence may have involved the project team in rather passé Constructionist programmes of 'Integration of the Arts,' when they had much more creative and exciting possibilities at hand, arising from their own architectural intentions. The touch of formality at the intersections suggests that the crucial importance of these passages to the whole design was felt by the project team, but it is expressed by something else, by the bridges themselves.

Viewed from the ground, or from other parts of the building, their visual importance is overwhelming. Surprising as it may seem, they assume complete architectural dominance over the vertical ducts of lifts and stairs, however powerful these may appear when they are not in visual competition with the bridges, and their dominance makes clear, as nothing else does, the horizontal continuity of the whole building.

The functional reason for these bridges is to make clearance for service roads entering the site, but the effect is not of connections between independent blocks of flats; rather, one sees and feels a continuous building which at these points has been pared down to its bare essentials, to communications that are more basic to the whole design than even the structural skeleton. Now the strength of this effect comes largely from the starkness of its expression - the first model had weather canopies over each bridge, with intermediate supports, and this, I am sure, would have muffed the whole effect.

The reason why these plain concrete trough-beams are so immediately effective in conveying the idea of communicative continuity lies, in

some way, in their visual relationship to the well-known photographs of the breakdown model of the Unite at Marseilles (Le Corbusier 1910-1960, page 154) in which blocks representing the duplex apartments are shown being threaded *into* the frame, and around a cardboard duct, representing the *rue intérieure*, which projects from the end of the assembly in much the same way as do the deck bridges at Park Hill.

It seems unlikely that the project team simply took over a visual effect from this photograph, but the fact remains that they are members of a generation that has never recovered from the impact of the *Unité*, and, furthermore, the idea of the *rue intérieure*, borrowed from Corb, is one of the few influences that was admitted by Park Hill's defenders during the early disputes about who thought of it first.

These street-decks are *rues intérieures* in so far as they are within the frame of the block and partly wrapped round by the maisonettes, but in being at the side of the building and open to the air, they approximate to an English tradition that runs from the Chester Rows to the Stirling and Gowan housing in Preston, by way of many spec-built terraces of shops which have access decks at first floor level, over the sales area.

More immediately to the point, however, is a development visible among student designs in the very early Fifties, in which some form of continuous horizontal circulation at high levels, with public spaces at intersections, was more or less *de rigueur* in all projects for high-density housing, and was finally summed up in two of the unsuccessful entries in the Golden Lane competition: one by the Smithsons, by whom the term street-deck may have been coined, and another by Ivor Smith and Jack Lynn, which was instrumental in their being invited to join J. L. Womersley's then very young team at Sheffield to develop a *street-deck* scheme for a site there (not, originally, Park Hill).

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Now, the desire to revise Corb, visible in all these projects, was part of a loosely anti-classicist movement that was to produce its most extreme manifestation in the Smithson's 'topological' project for Sheffield University as early as 1953, in which even more dramatic emphasis is laid on the exposition of circulation as the uniting factor of the design.* But it must be remembered that the existence of this movement only appears by hindsight from a decade later, that the terms 'un-classical' or 'anti-classical' were equally retrospective, and applied by some critics and some of the architects involved to explain what they thought had been done, rather than as slogans or tenets of faith while the designing was in progress. The Smithsons did not set out to be topological, though they seemed pleased enough to discover later that this was what they had been. It is to be doubted if the Park Hill project team set out to be anti-classical (the author can testify from first-hand, or first-ear, experience, that they were much more concerned with Constructionist Integration), and their design is not to be regarded as programmatic on that subject.

But against this, it must be noted that it is very conspicuously a child of its time—the hammer-headed lift towers standing away from the main structure are as much the indicator of a specific mental climate as was the Venetian window in its day. It represents a kind of building that a great many young architects in Britain in the early Fifties wanted to put up, and very few succeeded—the Market building in Sheffield, by Andrew Derbyshire, represents the same mood on a smaller scale, and Derbyshire, too, was in on the birth of the street-deck. Park Hill seems to represent one of those rare occasions when the intention to create a certain kind of architecture happens to encounter a programme and a site that can hardly be dealt with in any other way, and the result has the clarity that only arises when—as in the Villa Rotonda—aesthetic programme and functional opportunity meet and are instantly fused. But what Park Hill abundantly demonstrates is that there are other kinds of architectural clarity besides the Classical.

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Architects Sheffield Corporation City Architect's Department
City Architect J.L. Womersley
Project Architects Jack Lynn, Ivor Smith, Frederick Nicklin