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Peter Smithson



PETER SMITHSON, 1949

Something of Lubetkin has been there all my life in architecture. In 1939 I became a student. In 1940 someone showed me the publication of Highpoint Two in the *Architectural Review* (in the architecture school's library the *Reviews* were bound up in half-yearly volumes). It was the

'latest thing', in the film magazine sense. On the *Review's* enormous pages and glossy paper it seemed unattainable, a world for rich people.

After the war, when the Peterlee New Town office was set up at Shotton Hall, Gordon Ryder (with whom I had shared a room with mattresses and a gas ring in 1941–2) went to join Lubetkin there. It seemed that Lubetkin was to bring modern to the North. For me, to have a friend who was working for him was to be acquainted, even if at second hand, with, as it were, a great pre-war *director*.

When I moved to London in 1948, from Bloomsbury a Sunday walk brought one to Busaco Street, a tram ride to the block of flats opposite the Sadler's Wells Theatre. Busaco Street was the nearer, and was visited by Alison and myself for pleasure, instruction and speculation (about the appropriate size of open space in the enlarged metropolis). The photograph called 'Islington, North London, Backyard pattern' in our UR document written in 1953 (and published as *Ordinariness and Light* in 1970) was taken from a balcony at Busaco Street.

There was nothing in London to learn from in the late Forties and early Fifties except for Tecton. The revolt against the seemingly empty-of-meaning pattern-making of the Tecton housing façades was part of the beginning of our search for another ordering.

Berthold Lubetkin, born in 1901, is of the second generation of the Modern Movement. It is against Beaudouin 1898, Prouvé 1901, Kahn 1901, Sert 1902, Breuer 1902, and Eames 1907 that we must weigh

him. Modern architecture began in 1922; by the time these men had grown up the new architecture was already there. As for Alberti coming back to Florence, the new architecture was for them something to wonder at, to emulate.

Lubetkin was a witness in 1920 to the 'reenactment of the storming of the Winter Palace', not a participant in the storming itself. Of his contemporaries José Louis Sert is the most in parallel:

Lubetkin in Paris, as a volunteer linguist adjunct for Melnikov's USSR pavilion.

Sert in Paris, working for Le Corbusier.

Lubetkin to England.

Sert to the USA.

Lubetkin's post-war work in Bethnal Green.

Sert's post-war work at Peabody Terrace in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

After his GATEPAC youth in Barcelona, Sert's step-by-step growth from his Heroic Period inheritance was sustained to the end.

Lubetkin's later work seems so far outside the Tecton thrust as to make that assembly of (mostly AA) young men and women have a collective existence greater than any of its individual components.

As my knowledge of the past increased, I came to see Lubetkin's work in the Thirties as the stage sets of Constructivism, reused with their message removed, and the post-war work as a general drying-out of his later recycling, principally of Le Corbusier. Described in this way, he is an out-and-out eclectic whose justifications increasingly sought comfort in books – in thoughts already thought.

And yet... there's the Penguin Pool for one's grandchildren.

Flats in Rosebery Avenue, London – Tecton, 1946–9.

Penguin Pool, London Zoo – Berthold Lubetkin, 1935



VALERIE BENNETT, 1989