

David Roberts, *Make Public: Performing public housing in Ernö Goldfinger's Balfron Tower*

My research explores the history and future of Balfron Tower, a high-rise of 146 flats and maisonettes built in 1965-7, the first phase of Ernö Goldfinger's work on the Brownfield Estate in Poplar. In December 2015, Tower Hamlets approved plans to refurbish and privatise Balfron Tower. During the preceding three years I collaborated with the tower's current and former residents to campaign for Balfron to remain a beacon for public housing.

Central to my work was engagement with residents through a series of workshops to build collective knowledge, and activism which drew on this material and evidence to contribute to a more informed public debate and planning decisions. I developed an interactive online archive – balfrontower.org – and a successful application with James Dunnett to list Balfron Tower at Grade II* which explicitly recognises Goldfinger's social ideals and Balfron's social purpose as a key component of its heritage. In doing so, I advance an argument that the practice and guidance of heritage of post-war housing estates must not only pay tribute to the egalitarian principles at their foundations, it must enact them.

The rallying cry of my work, to 'make public' expresses three demands for practitioners working in public housing:

Materially – to protect and extend public housing provision at a time when austerity measures are dismantling it in ideal and form. Demand more public housing. It is cherished. It is vital. Public housing incrementally built stability and equality into Britain's urban fabric through a combination of extraordinary architectural progress and political aspiration. But in London, the city that pioneered these modern principles of public housing, we are doing the opposite. The GLA released figures last year that revealed estate regeneration schemes had doubled the amount of new homes on existing sites, 33,000 additional units, but in this process there was a net loss of 8300 social rented homes and only 1800 affordable built.

Procedurally – to make visible processes of urban change that are increasingly hidden from public view. As the public housing stock is increasingly privatised, so are the democratic processes and access to information about it – hidden behind labyrinthine planning portals or suppressed under the grounds of commercial confidentiality. Even if you can access information, it is often difficult to understand because of bureaucratic or legal language. My research proved this lack of clarity and certainty is a source of further discomfort for those caught up in processes of regeneration.

Methodologically – to make public your methods. Share your experiences and resources with residents and celebrate the richness of their knowledge. We have a duty to put our work at the service of those whose lives we seek to improve. With increasing regularity, housing estates are demolished or privatised to make way for regeneration schemes where developers claim to build lively, diverse, vibrant communities. My research demonstrated the genuine liveliness, diversity and vibrancy of the communities that already exist in these estates. There is a continued and urgent need to work with residents as these communities and the qualities they bring to London are diluted or dispersed.

It is perhaps too late to reconsider the approach at Balfron Tower, but it is certainly not too late for other practitioners. We must demand: *affordable housing* – retaining a proportion of social housing genuinely affordable to local communities; *accountable regeneration* – opening full access to information in order to justify decisions; and *inclusive consultation* – developing proposals together with residents in which everyone is able to fully participate. We must act together, for the 786,000 households living in social housing; for the 391,000 children living in overcrowded accommodation; for the 263,491 families on housing waiting lists; for the 50,490 households living in temporary accommodation; and for the 7,581 people who sleep rough every night, the project of public housing in London remains as relevant as ever.