Concrete Oslo

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The Barbican Estate, perhaps the last real utopian project built in Britain, is moored in the centre of London, like a giant vessel from a different time and place. Access is from across ramps and bridges that connect it like gangways to the city, or via obscure entrances from street level into the belly of this vast megastructure.

Yet, as a bold Brutalist development, the Barbican was instantly unpopular and it remains controversial today, polarizing people with its tough concrete look. It has nonetheless continued to serve as a highly functional urban enclave, separating itself from London physically while incorporating it and subsuming it architecturally. As a megastructure rehousing such a vast amount of people, the Barbican could have easily failed, as did many other similar projects that turned into destitute concrete jungles, unsafe windswept dystopias. On the contrary, it has become primary real estate with the value rising above that of the surrounding area following its listing in 2001. Perhaps the statutory protection gave a sense of security to the prospective buyers that things would not be allowed to change uncontrollably, perhaps it was the acknowledgement that the Barbican was now a part of an official London heritage, or perhaps it was the media coverage that accompanied the divisive listing, drawing attention to its aesthetic as something uniquely urban and of value, trendy in an unconventional way.

Within an English-speaking context people have often forgotten that the word brutalism was derived from 'béton brut', which simply means 'raw concrete', because the rough cast material is not concealed with

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plaster. The word is also closely related to the concept of 'art brut', where the unfinishedness of a less refined artistic expression is linked to ideas of honesty and authenticity. Indeed, Le Corbusier was acquainted with the French artist Jean Dubuffet who founded this movement in 1947/48. Yet for too many years exposed concrete was laden with negative connotations. In contrast to the German term 'Sichtbeton' that simply means visible concrete, the word 'brutalist architecture' made people in Britain think of violence and the bunker architectures of the Cold War. Today however, with this military threat subsided into history, a new generation is more openly receptive to the urban expression of this kind of megastructure, with which they associate their own experience of the city, including the more emotive associations of the word 'brutalism'. The synthetic artificial landscape of the Barbican in all its raw monumentality is perceived as 'real', in contrast to the smooth glazed generic city of capitalism all around that read as computer-generated imagery. The new mediation of the Barbican within popular culture has helped to promote this new reception. Although in its own way through this and also due to the market forces of conservation now Brutalism itself is increasingly becoming a commodity.

**Between old and new**

The Barbican is an interweaving of old and new. The new architecture, designed by Chamberlain, Powell & Bon, embraced surviving historic features, playing with them and transforming them: Semi-circular turrets in the old city wall are echoed by the concrete barrel-vaults that now cover the walkways and form the rooflines of the horizontal residential blocks.

In the Barbican, at podium level, more than 5 metres above the surrounding roads, there exists a different world that is only accessible to pedestrians, while the rushing city beyond continues at a frenetic pace below. The traffic roars unabated, with only the signal lights to control the ebb and flow of vehicles. The high-level walkway is the last reminder of a piece of urban infrastructure that is now slowly being dismantled, but which was originally intended to criss-cross the 'Square

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Mile’ of the City of London as an alternative to the chaotic urban jumble, thereby separating pedestrians from vehicular traffic.

Many of the residential blocks sit elevated on pilaster allowing for the pedestrians to traverse the monumental terrain below them.

One of the oldest testimonies of the old city to be subsumed in the Barbican is the church of St Giles Cripplegate, dating 1394 and standing proudly in the heart of the estate. Originally located just outside the old wall that encircled the City, the church withstood the Great Fire of London in 1666. It was, however, burnt out during the German bombing raid on London on the night of 24th August 1940, but otherwise it survived the Blitz, whereas the surrounding houses did not. Adjacent to the church today are still fragments of the old city wall, as well as gravestones that were integrated into the landscape features of the Barbican as a strange kind of homage to heritage.

With later additions and changes to the tower in 1682.

But despite being deferential to this ancient context, the Barbican offers a new way of living in the city. Inside the estate, exists a comprehensive world of reinforced concrete that could house, if it wanted to, a total of 6,000 residents in long horizontal blocks and gigantic towers that stick their saw-toothed silhouettes up into the London skyline, easily read from afar. But the Barbican is not just a mass housing project, providing convenient residences for the human infrastructure of the City. It is also a city within the city, and includes alongside the 2,000+ residences a range of other facilities: a cultural centre with a concert hall, an art gallery, a theatre, a cinema, a lending library, as well as restaurants and public houses, car parks, two schools, a church, a hostel, a swimming pool and a gym. Built in a post-war era that still used the pencil, the pen and the straight-edge for its design tools, the Barbican’s facilities are tucked into a complex sculptural form that includes walkways and gardens, along with a large water feature, to drown out the sounds of the city: Beech Street runs through its belly and so, lower down, does the underground railway.

The new architecture of Chamberlain, Powell & Bon adopts tried-and-tested architectural forms that exist elsewhere in London, transposing them for a different time at a different scale and using different building materials. We can recognize the Neoclassical crescent form at Frobisher Crescent, and the idea of the Georgian garden square that allowed private access only to its residents is brought into the twentieth century in Thomas More Garden and Speed Garden. Massive pileti hold up the residential blocks that frame and are framed by unexpected views of plantings and water. This is indeed a picturesque experience. The landscaped areas in between allow for a deceptive spaciousness that belies the high density of this development. Traversing the large piazzas, walking down stairs and across bridges, we are not aware of the orthogonal plan of the architecture above and below, which is then cranked at an angle to follow also the line of Beech Street. The built surroundings are full of visual contrast and long vistas, and getting lost in the Barbican is just as much part of the aesthetic experience as it is in Venice — a historic city that was also designed around two separated forms of infrastructure. In an inclusive overall urban environment that appears to mimic London as the modern global metropolis, the same approach was taken that allowed the city
The Barbican was built to repopulate the City with a clerical and managerial workforce. Its construction brought two decades of disruption.
to develop as small quasi-independent townships based around squares during the Georgian era. Perhaps this is the most successful strategy to deal with the 'bigness' of a city like London, in a sense to ignore it, to turn inwards, and to form something comprehensive that works separately at a smaller scale.

**Construction**

Building commenced in 1962 but the Barbican Estate was not completed until 1982, due to the vast scale of the project and industrial action that reduced the work on site to a standstill. Perhaps the everlasting turmoil of construction at the heart of London also initially added to the negative reception of the Barbican. Already from 1955, the architectural firm of Chamberlin, Powell & Bon had started working on designs for the development, even before they were actually commissioned to do so by the City of London in 1960. The young firm was desperate to get the job, having famously won the competition in 1951 to build the Golden Lane Estate that sits on a plot adjacent to the Barbican. Both of these schemes were responding to the depopulation of the city after the war. While increasingly crystalline Miesian office blocks were springing up in a plethora all over post-war London, there remained only 5,000 people within the 'Square Mile', an area that a century earlier housed 128,000 souls. By the 1950s, less than 50 residents were still living in the Cripplegate district where the Barbican now stands. The intention was not to bring back literally the same people that had been evacuated from the site during the Second World War, but instead to use the opportunity to carry out a mass clearance of the area, as part of the wider plans to rebuild the City of London so that it would be suitable for a modern world of international finance and trade. Buildings that could well have been restored were being torn down as

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early as 1941. Post-war rebuilding of London was also to a certain extent about social engineering: not only a new kind of architecture was needed, but also a new kind of population, as the capitalist system was already starting to feel the strains of commuters who flocked to the City of London from the many outlying suburbs.

As part of the egalitarian aspirations of the Welfare State, the Golden Lane Estate had been built as social housing that would help to bring back ‘key workers’ such as nurses and policemen. The estate provided 558 dwellings for approximately 1,500 residents, but its flats and maisonettes were sparse and compact, and meant mostly for single people and young couples. While there was some provision for small families, the larger poor families were not being accommodated. The commissioning of the design for this estate had, as mentioned, been determined via a competition that the young architect and lecturer, Geoffrey Powell, won against many other entrants among which were Alison and Peter Smithson. Powell duly went into partnership with his fellow lecturers Peter Chamberlin and Christoph Bon, who likewise taught at the Kingston Polytechnic (now Kingston University). The aim in the Golden Lane Estate was to develop the site as an inward-looking ‘urban village’ that would not only provide spaces to live in, but would also form a small viable enclave with many civic amenities. The concept behind this had already been explored in London at Kensal House by Elizabeth Denby and Maxwell Fry in 1937, and was of course also related to the ideas that Le Corbusier and other modernist architects had been developing since the 1920s. At the Barbican the idea of the urban village is merged with the new use of exposed concrete and expanded into the megastructure as one large sculptural enclave.

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8 “British Blast London” ACME Radiophoto, 7 July 1941. Private archive of author.


Concrete

But the Barbican Estate, with its impressive cultural centre, was never intended as social housing. It was meant to provide housing for professionals, clerks and managers that were to be encouraged to move from the suburbs and live closer to their places of work in the City of London. The use of high quality building materials and even the treatment of its concrete — with its granite aggregate and worked like stone, bush-hammered and pick-hammered to give it texture — attests to this.

Following the acclaim given to the Golden Lane Estate, and an intensive period of self-motivated activity in producing design proposals for the Barbican site, the practice of Chamberlin, Powell and Bon were given the go-ahead to build the Barbican. Construction started in 1963 with Milton Court, followed by the residential blocks, carried out in three phases, and finally the cultural centre in the middle of the estate. Its scale was vast, covering 14 hectares of what had been mostly wasteland. The open objective was to aim for high-density levels in terms of the housing provision. Yet the delayed and gradually phased opening of the Barbican Estate meant that it soon became embroiled in an awkward time for Brutalist architecture. The deadly collapse of the 20-storey Ronan Point block in May 1968, following a gas explosion, became an iconic symbol for its imagery of an architectural approach that had gone so badly wrong. That housing estate, which lay in Newham in East London, had been built cheaply and quickly, with construction starting on site in 1966 and residents moving in just two years later. Almost inevitably, dreadful compromises had been made in the design process and during construction by cutting corners in the use of the concrete building system, as well as in employing an underskilled labour force to erect the estate. When Ronan Point collapsed, it had only been inhabited for two months.

For decades thereafter, the architecture of the British Welfare State came under relentless attack for the failures of conception and execution. During the period while the completion of the Barbican was still underway, critics kept up a steady but merciless barrage of words against the use of exposed concrete and against high-rise living. As Martin Pawley wrote in an article for Architectural Design magazine in 1972:

You will find immense tower blocks constructed more or less as [Le Corbusier's]. ... His ideas were taken and built, and the consequences have been disastrous. Disastrous because the social infrastructure for such developments is hardly ever built (it is not understood how to build it). In any case it is dubious if high rise is a feasible mode for living, compared to the one it replaces.

In 1987, only five years after the Barbican Estate was completed, the Arts Council celebrated the influence of Le Corbusier on British post-war architecture through a major exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, a building that was itself the result of the adoption of Brutalist concrete design. Yet the fervour to condemn this kind of architecture continued unabated. Christopher Booker wrote in his review for the Daily Mail:

During the war, as Hitler's bombs laid waste large parts of Britain's major cities, a number of planners and architects were recruited to the planning and rebuilding of those cities.

Some of the most influential of them, like Arthur Ling, the mastermind of the Abercrombie Plan for London, had been the most fanatical of Le Corbusier's pre-war disciples.

It was largely thanks to their influence that, in 1947, the Labour Government's Town and Country Planning Act gave local authorities unprecedented powers to plan and to organise redevelopment in Britain.

Ten years later, the first fruits of this silent revolution began to appear, as Britain saw the first monster buildings appear above the skyline.
In London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham, down came the old back-to-back neighbourly houses in their millions. Up went the gigantic new tower blocks and housing estates, like the Aylesbury in South London, the colossal Hulme Estate in Manchester, the towers of Everton and the Gorbals, Ronan Point, Broadwater Farm (completed 1970) and thousands more.14

The hard concrete is softened by water features and planting.

Listing
When, in 2001, the Barbican was eventually designated as an item of protected heritage, at Grade II level, by the then-Minister for the Arts, Tessa Blackstone, public opinion was polarized. The City of London had strongly resisted English Heritage’s recommendation to listing the estate as Grade II*, which would have placed more exacting restrictions. In doing so they managed to convince the Secretary of State that Milton Court, the first phase of the development – including a residential component along with a fire station, coroner’s court, office of weights and measures, civil defence school and mortuary, and connected to the rest of the Barbican Estate via a footbridge – was not actually part of the Barbican Estate at all, and hence should remain unprotected. In consequence, the overall listing was pushed down to Grade II.15 Milton Court was duly torn down for redevelopment in 2008. It was quickly replaced with a 36-storey residential skyscraper by David Walker Architects that alongside its residential component included more space for the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. The Heron Tower then opened in 2013, continuing the seemingly unstoppable transmutation of the City of London into what increasingly resembles canyons of glass and steel that no longer allow for spaces to live in between.

As possibly the largest structure in Europe that now exists under historic protection, the listing of the Barbican megastructure has also meant a significant increase in responsibility for the City of London. Once the estate became statutorily listed, the City was no longer free to make its own independent decisions about how the spaces that they owned could be used or changed. On top of this came a heavy workload associated with dealing with the listed building consent applications that would be required from the owners of what are now mostly privately-owned flats, every time that someone wanted to make an alteration. With more than 200 different floor plans on the estate, and as the heritage protection regulations cover the interiors of these dwellings as well, this would inevitably be hard work. Initially, too, the residents were outraged by the implications of statutory protection, as they felt that they could no longer change their properties as they wished to: indeed, their objections were the subject of much discussion during the whole listing process. Many residents claimed that the estate would become a slum if it could not be continually modernized. Hence it was decided that the only way forward.

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was to produce a guidance document that would streamline the process of making listed building consent applications, by clarifying which parts of the historical fabric on the Barbican Estate could be changed, and which had to remain as it was originally.16

Taste

These complex and often heated negotiations, which eventually resulted in the drafting of the Listed Building Management Guidelines,17 became a tug-of-war between the vested parties including the Corporation of London, the residents' association, English Heritage (now rebranded as Historic England), and the experts from the Twentieth Century Society (of whom I had become the main protagonist). The guidance document was written by Avanti Architects, led by John Allan, who had been brought on board as independent consultants. In order to appease the Barbican residents, the decision was made — entirely against the advice of the Twentieth Century Society — to allow the removal of the bespoke kitchens as well as the bathrooms, which included the iconic 'Barbican' sink produced by Twyfords.18 As a gesture towards heritage protection, a salvage store was provided in the underground car park area where the original fixtures and fittings could be deposited in case that they were desired by another resident for reinstatement in their flat. A further token to the heritage lobby was the designation of a totally preserved 'heritage flat' that was to be open for visits by interested groups.

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18 Letter from Eva Branscombe, then caseworker for the Twentieth Century Society, to Breda Daly, conservation officer of the Corporation of London dated 20 September 2004.
While in 2003 the Barbican still topped the poll for being London's ugliest building. Nowadays, the seemingly tough and relentless language of Brutalist architecture has paradoxically become increasingly popular with a younger generation of city dwellers and architectural writers, and has been featured on television in gardening shows and advertisements as the quintessential urban environment. More than a decade after its listing, the Barbican has not turned into a slum, despite the worries of some residents, and instead has prospered due to the fact that people know that it cannot in fact be changed, that satellite dishes will not be springing from the balconies, and that a steady stream of bad maintenance will not be adding to a gradual attrition of the building fabric. Indeed, if anything, the Barbican now makes the case for concrete built heritage par excellence. There are constant guided architectural tours that are a popular addition to the more conventional London sightseeing agenda, and dainty china mugs feature its saw-toothed towers. While New York’s Highline project now successfully emulates the high-level pedestrian walkways that were planned across London more than half a century ago, but became unfashionable and have by now all but disappeared in the frenzy to rebuild the City yet again, the Barbican stands aloof, bracing itself against the onslaught of piecemeal planning and standing firm in the face of changing urban fashions. It has become an icon of the modern metropolis as a positive place to live in, even though — or just because — it is tough. As a vision of an alternative city, it gives us possibly a more realistic reflection of what London is actually about, or what it could have been if it had existed in a different time and place.

Dr. Eva Branscome is an Austrian-American architectural historian and writer based in London. Her accomplishments in protecting architectural heritage, when working for eight years at the Twentieth Century Society, led to the addition of more than 50 buildings on the statutory list of historic buildings in England and Scotland (including the US Embassy, Barbican Estate, Lloyds Building, the University of East Anglia and the Brixton Markets). Since 2012, Branscome has been teaching at University College London and the University of Westminster. Her book *Hans Hollein and Postmodernism: Art and Architecture on Austria, 1958–1985* was published by Routledge in December 2017.
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