

For: The Map is the Territory

I've been doing this project for the past year or so. The project is about a few different things. One of the things it's about is: what it means to be invested in the place where you live. To think about this question, I've been doing lots of research into the place where I live.

There are two reasons for that. First: I live there, and I think of myself as invested in it. Second: there was an extraordinary period of organised action from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s, when many people living there were conspicuously, assertively invested in it. There were community newsletters, community clearances of unsightly vacant sites, and even a community-led community centre. All, material signs of people who are conspicuously invested in the place where they live.

So, where did the momentum for all of this come from? Very simply, the local government wanted to demolish the entire area of pretty Georgian houses and rebuild it all as modernist social housing. The anxiety and antipathy was as great as it could be, because it had already been done to part of the area, a few years before, when whole streets of Georgian houses were demolished to make way for the housing estate that I now live on.

So where, in turn, did the momentum for the rebuilding plans come from? In part: pragmatism, and undeniable need. Victorian slums were still commonplace, where there were still any homes at all, this being East London still unreconstituted from the Blitz. But it's equally well established that part of the momentum, perhaps in tandem with this material necessity, was a shared utopian impulse. Local and metropolitan governments' architects offices in the 1950s and 1960s were filled with the sense that, in the words of one, "we were all little Corbusiers?". The familiar, modernist ideal of standardised, rationalised, industrial production used to provide good housing for all.

Thus far, I don't think any of this is particularly contentious. So here goes.

Utopianisms seem to come up in most projects I do. A few years ago I was researching the story of Don Quixote and came across commentary by a literary scholar called Maravell: 'Utopia and Counter-Utopia in the Quixot',

the book was called. The difference between a utopia and a counter-utopia, Maravell asserts, is that a utopia can be made from the world as it is now. Somehow. Otherwise, it is a fantasist's escapism; something closer to a dystopia than a utopia. It follows, then, that implicit in any 'genuine' utopia is a route map towards itself.

Suddenly, we're on more contentious ground. Most introductions to the concept of 'utopia' begin with an explanation of the word's etymology, Thomas More's pun of 'utopia' as both 'good place' and 'no place'; a place so good that it could never be realised, by some readings, at least. Any attempt to instantiate it brings the taint of material reality, which is enough to negate it as a utopianism.

So at the very least, there's a strong tension in the idea of realising a self-consciously utopian project. Some such projects accept this tension wholeheartedly. In the first half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of utopian, intentional communities were founded across North America. A few had very literal blueprints, but most did not. Most of these were in a constant condition of rebuilding until they were abandoned, most after only a few years.

Later in the nineteenth century, as capitalist hegemony consolidated across the United States and utopian communities were increasingly ridiculed and denigrated, the founder of one of the most industrially successful communities defended their kind thus: an abandoned community is not a failed community, because utopian projects are necessarily built through trial and error. A radically different arrangement for living cannot become a practical reality any other way. Trial and error will be needed until a place is made that's close enough to the sought-after 'no-place'.

In modernist social housing in the UK, the Roehampton Lane development in south west London is usually taken as the moment when a place was made that was 'close enough'. After a few, previous pre- and post-war attempts of varying success, Roehampton Lane realised the promise of concrete as the material that could meet the practical demand – and the utopian principle – of good housing for all.

This is the historical moment that brought my estate into being. Roehampton Lane was completed in 1954, and in 1959, the houses that occupied the land

that my estate would be built on were served with Compulsory Purchase Orders and demolished shortly afterwards.

This narrative is familiar to lots of places in London, but it's not good enough.

For a start, my estate – including its high rise towers – is made of brick, not concrete. Or rather, it's made of a concrete frame that was clad in bricks, rather than in precast concrete panels. Why? According to one of the architects of the estate, because the Chair of the local government's Housing Committee at the time was a bricklayer and, like most bricklayers in this heyday of all-concrete high-rises, he feared for the future of his industry.

Was this a degeneration of the concrete form? No. Concrete, from the beginning, was made to resemble other materials, especially brick. Before it began to be cast as panels to clad over a frame, it was cast as bricks, to be stacked exactly as bricks are. Incidentally, a good example comes from the temple at the heart of another of the intentional communities in mid-nineteenth century North America, a place that was named Halcyon, in California.



Even when concrete began to be produced as cladding panels, the panels would be stained to resemble brickwork and embellished with ornament. For a fantastic example of this, type into Google Street View “228 Sydenham Road, Croydon”. You will be shown a suburban street of redbrick and pebble-dash that could be anywhere in Croydon, except that the house in the centre of the

screen really was made, in 1882, out of concrete panels clad onto a wooden frame.

There's a word for these sorts of observations. Skeuomorphism is "the practice of incorporating obsolete elements into a design, for familiarity or out of tradition, even though they no longer serve any functional purpose". Think of an early car that looks like a horseless carriage, or an early digital camera with the automated shutter release sound of a mechanical camera. Alternatively, think along the very narrow lines of current, online debate: the apple mac calendar designed to look like a wall calendar, or a smartphone's memo tool that resembles a notebook.

So instead of our broader use of 'skeuomorphism', we could perhaps say 'cultural inertia', but there are two problems with this term. The first is with the word 'inertia'. The term sounds like a euphemism for 'cultural regression'. The temptation is to judge skeuomorphic tendencies harshly, especially when they had to be overcome before a movement could flourish that, at least ostensibly, sought to rid cities of Victorian slums and replace them with good housing for everyone.

The second problem with the term 'cultural inertia' is the word, 'culture'. We're sometimes still tempted, perhaps, to think of 'culture' as something floating freely above the physical world; a structure held only within subjects, or even between subjects. No. Culture is there in objects, which also means it's there in industry. Here's one, general, example. From the beginning, concrete was cast against wood, because it worked, and because it was economical. I expect we all associate concrete with oblongs, and to a large degree, we have the long-established technologies of timber saw mills to thank for this.

Here's a more specific example: Portland House, one of the first non-residential high-rises in London. In 1957, the man appointed to research precast concrete as a potential cladding material for the building found there was no relevant industry information published in the UK, whatsoever. Three years later, when it came to appointing a site contractor, the successful firm was, presumably quite sensibly, the owner of the only tower crane in London. That's: the only tower crane in London.

All of these observations fall under the heading of 'culture'.

So I'll settle not on the term skeuomorphism, nor 'cultural inertia', but on the even more clumsy 'place-inertia'. If a utopia is a 'no-place', then its antithesis is, quite rightly, 'place': that unstable composition of people, and other material.

The consequence is perhaps the inverse of the title of this event. Rather than 'The Map is the Territory', the territory is the map. If you want to know how far the place fell short of the utopianism – how much the route map was diverted by – then look at the stuff of it. Thereafter follows the centuries-old practices of saw mills, a bureaucrat looking out for his own manufacturing industry, and a 20th century metropolis with one tall crane to go around.

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