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Towards a phenomenology of the concrete megastructure: Space and perception at the Brunswick Centre, London

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Introduction

More than a decade has passed since the first writing of this work, and much has changed in London’s physical and social landscape since then. Indeed, the pace of change and alteration to the face and shape of the city has been unexpectedly dramatic, notwithstanding the financial crash of 2008 and accompanying political and economic instability. In the view through the window at my desk, the once open skyline marked only by the dome of St Paul’s cathedral and the Canary Wharf tower has been filled in with stark, illuminated building blocks and the dotted red lights marking the tops of construction cranes – 24 at the last count – which indicate the transformation is not yet complete. Such radical interventions in the urban fabric echo the transformations of London’s post-war landscape, in which modernist housing projects such as the Brunswick, the subject of this chapter, played such a significant part, significantly changing the shape and texture not only of the built fabric but also of the lived experience of the city’s inhabitants across a richly interconnected network of urban neighbourhoods. Between the 1960s and 70s, parts of the city changed spatially and aesthetically in ways that could hardly have been imagined before the destruction brought by World War 2, and in doing so had a dramatic impact on patterns of urban life at local level and through networks of social interaction spread across a constellation of urban places and spaces. Today, many of those developments – typically
large-scale sites of local authority housing, such as the Heygate and Aylesbury estates in Elephant and Castle – are themselves the subject of demolition and replacement. These projects remake the city in equally far-reaching ways, re-affirming the highly contested and politicised nature of these disruptive processes of physical and social displacement, driven by even larger global forces – flows of capital and people and shifting political alliances.

In this chapter on the Brunswick, I take one such example of radical urban intervention as a case study through which to consider the impact of urban change embodied in built form on the city’s inhabitants, focusing on an ethnographic investigation of architecture as social setting, and a phenomenological framing of urban experience. This approach seems all the more relevant in light of both the far-reaching economisation of the urban landscape and its inhabitants, which has gathered pace through the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and politics in London, and the significance of the capital as a focus for grounded research on the diverse experiences of post-colonial, cosmopolitan urbanites – elite and underprivileged alike (Rabinow 1986). An anthropological perspective re-centres personal and social lived experience in understandings of the city and the far-reaching effects that globally circulating urban and planning policies have on communities, notably the privatisation of urban development and commercialisation and heritagisation of city centres. Furthermore, this approach addresses the more recent ‘affective turn’ in geography and architecture theory, and the associated concerns that have arisen regarding its splitting of the sensuous and experiential from the mental imaginaries and thinking processes that impel action (Spencer 2016). Instead, it posits an integrated and holistic understanding of phenomenological urban experience as a fusion of body–mind–imagination. Such a perspective helps to make sense of a lengthy history of engagement between residents and the building they inhabit in this case study on the Brunswick – a structure that anchors their experiences of city dwelling and frames a tangible, emplaced aesthetic of social identity.

The Brunswick is a concrete megastructure comprising a shopping precinct and flats, built near Russell Square in central London between 1968 and 1972, listed by English Heritage (Grade II) as a building of architectural and historical significance in 2000, and refurbished in 2006 to implement some significant alterations to the public and retail space at its heart. This chapter, presenting a re-reading of its spatial characteristics, is concerned with revealing the layers of cultural meaning invested in a building typically classified as a work of abstract modernism,
or stark brutalism, until softened by its 10-year-old refurbishment, through a process of architectural objectification conducted by architectural experts. It sets out to develop a reinterpretation of the building as a social setting embedded in and interconnected with the city fabric, articulated by an array of urban voices within ‘a continuum of socio-spatial attachments’ (Clifford 1998: 367). It does so through a multi-dimensional exploration of its design and occupation, bringing to the fore issues of perception and embodiment, or ‘being-in-the-world’, at individual and collective level.

The Brunswick: material and social context

The Brunswick is a long, formerly open-ended shopping precinct in the heart of Georgian Bloomsbury, bordered along its east and west edges with monolithic concrete A-frame blocks housing some 600 flats from first to seventh floor level, and 677 people, as recorded in the 2001 census. It was designed by the architect Patrick Hodgkinson (1930–2016) during the 1950s and 60s as an alternative low-rise model of high-density housing, representing an inspired challenge to the prevailing high-rise housing policies of the time.

The complex has a monumental porticoed entrance (fig. 2.1) onto Brunswick Square, on the east, under which the Curzon cinema (formerly

![Fig. 2.1 View from east through Brunswick Square's porticoed entrance, O'Donnell Court. © S. Stone](image)
Renoir) is located, but the better-used, if more modest, entrance into the precinct was for much of its history on the west, from Marchmont Street, a shopping street in decline, and more recently from the south. However, the most distinctive external feature of the development, apart from its sheer scale and its unabashed use of exposed concrete, is the cascading glass terraces on both sides of each block (fig. 2.2) – the famous ‘winter gardens’ to the flats, which glint in the light on a bright day and give a view of the sky from within. Inside, the housing blocks are characterised by long perspectives down access galleries passing through the heavy concrete of the distinctive internal A-frame structure (fig. 2.3). The view down into the broad, shadowy concourse at podium level contrasts with sudden views out at the upper levels (the sixth and seventh floors) across rooftops and cityscape, while the monotonous linear sequence of front doors on each floor is brought to life by personal details colouring the thresholds between common parts and private domestic space (fig. 2.4).

The development was originally designed to create an upmarket shopping environment with a grand, civic presence, and public gardens were planned for the terraces looking over it at second-floor level. However, the terraces were closed to the public early on, the grand external staircase leading up to them removed for security reasons, and a large percentage of the flats, originally intended for mixed-income

Fig. 2.2 View of winter gardens, O’Donnell Court, prior to 2006 refurbishment. Source: author
Fig. 2.3 View through A-frame structure, Foundling Court, first floor level. © S. Stone
occupancy, designated as sheltered accommodation for the elderly or fragile. During the 1980s and 90s, the shopping precinct looked neglected and decaying, most of the retail units behind the colonnades of concrete columns standing empty, and the whole development acquired a ruinous aura and reputation to match: ‘They should do something about it. It’s been neglected. Keeps being sold,’ said my respondents in 2000. Both the public and private spaces of the complex became host to social interactions and activities deemed inappropriate and transgressive, including rough sleeping, prostitution and drug consumption, coexisting with the everyday patterns of regular residential life – provisioning, schooling, earning a living and socialising in the city (fig. 2.5).

A major retail refurbishment completed between 2004 and 2006 (fig 2.6) transformed the atmosphere and public spaces of the complex, arousing mixed emotions on the part of those who knew the Brunswick from the inside, as reported by the residents I interviewed at the time and recorded in my field notes (see postscript on methodology). ‘Mary said a wonderful thing when somebody asked her about living in the Brunswick Centre… she said, “It’s wonderful, I never see anybody.” I suddenly realised along with that, that the emptiness of the place is actually one of its attractions… you’d think it was slightly menacing. But it’s not…’. Mark bought his flat on the sixth floor in 1994 and moved in with his partner, Mary, her teenage daughter and a dog, which became a much-loved companion: ‘there were three – four really – of us’ and he
Fig. 2.5 Brunswick Centre shopping precinct, view from south, prior to 2006 refurbishment. Source: author

Fig. 2.6 ‘A high street for Bloomsbury’: view through shopping precinct after refurbishment, showing new supermarket at northern end. Source: author
‘would have to find whatever little space there was’. At the time of my research, Mark lived in the two-bedroom flat alone, using one room as an office where sometimes an assistant would come and work with him. Social relationships and interactions were evidently important, and the flat was full of objects and images that prompted a ready verbal narrative about different people and places, extending back many years. But he loved the emptiness inside the Brunswick: ‘I think I’m much more appreciative of it now than I was when I first moved in.’ The fact that the atrium spaces at the heart of the housing blocks remained quiet, uninhabited zones was a great relief to him in comparison to the busyness of the newly refurbished shopping centre – an effective buffer from the hubbub of people he describes as shopaholics and caffeine addicts (a not so oblique reference to the alcoholics and drug addicts they have replaced) around the new retail and restaurant outlets he could see from his windows.

Mark disliked the fact that the newcomers were people ‘who you don’t know’. The relationship between the precinct space and the living-room windows of the flats looking over the precinct is acoustically very intimate, even though the line of vision is across towards the windows of the opposite block or towards the upper storeys of the older buildings on Bernard Street and up to the sky, not down. To get a view of the precinct, you need to stand up and look down with some deliberation. For these reasons, it had become a special pleasure for Mark to be able to walk out of his flat into the empty space of the atrium where he was unlikely to bump into anybody that he didn’t know, nor even anyone that he did know. As a person who did not depend on chance encounters or ‘gossip opportunities’, as another resident put it, to sustain a social existence, it suited him very well. Moreover, it generated an extended zone of privacy and belonging around his flat, which perhaps compensated to some extent for the small size of the flat itself. His sense of proprietorship within his own territory was effectively extended by his awareness of his own flat as part of a more global scheme, which, as a design professional and someone very familiar with the plans of the Brunswick, he was particularly able to visualise and hold in his mind’s eye. He also appreciated the emptiness of the atrium space as a sign that security was working and that undesirable intruders had been successfully excluded. One of his main points of disagreement with the original design of the building was the idea of the permeable ‘internal street’ connected to the public spaces outside via numerous open access points, which he believed to have been a big mistake.

Stephanie, however, who was largely housebound, told me that she used to enjoy the atrium space as well, precisely because it felt like being
‘outside’ without going out. Then the council sealed up the view-holes to the outside and secured the entrances, and now in its current internalised form she finds it oppressive. She told me she was lucky to live on the ‘outside’ of the Brunswick, because it looks over the street and the pub rather than onto the precinct and the opposite block, and so gives her some sense of connection to the city without having to go anywhere.

The floor on which Mark lived, together with the top floor above it and the floor below, were perceived by others who lived there as having a strong sense of community compared to the lower floors of the Brunswick, where Stephanie lived. In fact, there were a higher proportion of newcomers on the upper floors. Some of these people, who tended to have professional jobs and wide social networks extending beyond the immediate locality, had chosen to invest in the local community they believed they had found at the Brunswick as a kind of project, partly because they had not previously experienced that kind of life, lived at local level within the global city. Susan, who initially shared her flat with a flatmate but had now established a more conventional household set-up with her boyfriend and their baby, said that ‘we genuinely didn’t know our neighbours’ where she lived before in another part of London. By contrast, she described the drawn-out, unusually intimate, process of buying the Brunswick flat from the elderly couple who lived there as like ‘buying a flat from your granny’, and she also referred to her neighbour, Elsie, who would invite them round for meals and ask favours of them, in the same terms. She reported that when she took her maternity leave and started to see her Brunswick neighbours in the street during the day, for the first time, there had been much excitement at the realisation she was going to have a baby, because, they said, ‘We haven’t had a baby up here [on the upper floors] for years!’

Susan never spoke of ‘empty’ spaces at the Brunswick, and was enjoying the busyness of the precinct, especially since giving up work to look after her baby. She would regularly meet up, outside the new Starbucks, with other new mothers for whom it provided a meeting place. Released from her office away from the Brunswick, her world had become geographically more localised, and simultaneously the precinct, which she would not formerly have used that much, had become a more attractive and less obviously ‘local’ place to be, compensating for that loss of daily engagement with the wider city.

The apotheosisation of the everyday and the local in the form of the Brunswick estate by some of those newcomers who had ready access to other, non-local social networks, was evocatively embodied in the
narrative of one long-term resident, Gloria, who was part of a highly ‘emplaced’ family network going back several generations: ‘Basically my roots are here, and deep are the roots’, she told me. In common with many other first-generation residents, she had been relocated by Camden Council to O’Donnell Court at the Brunswick from her home in a local street, along with neighbours and relatives including her aunt and her mother. Her three immediate neighbours from the old street lived ‘across the landing, and… up the stairs’, she explained, evoking a notion of the Brunswick as a big house; her aunt lived ‘over the way’ in Foundling Court. But notwithstanding the close presence of friends and relatives, she noted that ‘You could live here for a year and not see anybody’, which she attributed to ‘the nature of flats’. She defined her neighbours as people who were ‘there if you need them’, but not necessarily to interact with on a daily basis.

Modernism and anthropology

Richard Sennett (1993) described the Brunswick Centre in Bloomsbury in terms that epitomise a view of modernist architecture and urban intervention as abstract, alienating, over-scaled and largely devoid of cultural reference. His sentiments echo through Daniel Miller’s sweeping reference to ‘the social disaster of the new built environment’, identified as ‘the major expression of modernity’ – ‘modernity as alien abstraction so brilliantly described by Simmel’ (Miller 1987). Indeed, there is a large body of literature that presents modernism as a condition of breakdown in social cohesion and collective belief. As such, it implies a negation of the very concept of culture, and this perhaps explains the problems of developing a discourse about modern architecture as material culture within the wider context of anthropology.

The classic critiques of modernism posit a condition of alienation between the individual and the external material world that fundamentally affects the individual’s sense of, and ability to realise, self-identity, particularly in an urban context – but at the same time may offer positive new opportunities for freedom and fulfilling experience. Baudelaire, Benjamin and, indeed, Simmel all explored the possibilities offered by the modern city for the freedom of the individual and for fulfilling experience in a highly personal, rather than collective, dimension, precisely because of the loosening of traditional social bonds and the fragmentation of a holistic cultural framework triggered by the conditions of modernity – notably a compression of time and space brought about by changes in
labour, production and commodity exchange, driven by new manufacturing and communication technologies.

Modernist architecture, art and literature enthusiastically embraced the possibilities generated by the new ambiguity concerning notions of place and localised identity that were generated by these economic changes, and the processes of spatial and cultural integration that they prompted. Giddens (1991) underlines the fundamental distinction between modern life and ‘most of human history [when] people lived in social settings that were fairly closely connected with each other’ (Giddens 1991:257) and the local community was dominant. By contrast, ‘the settings of modern social life are much more diverse and segmented’ (Giddens 1991:257), and lifestyle choices thus become a primary means of structuring social stratification, as analysed by Bourdieu (1977), as well as representing the results of class differences in the realm of production.

The very foundation of the modernist project in architecture was an explicit engagement with notions of cultural alienation and disintegration that are quite opposite to the project of traditional anthropology, rendering the modernist architectural artefact not only uninteresting but even distasteful. Anthropological studies of modernist architecture (Attfield 1989; Boudon 1972; Miller 1988) have tended to focus on the ways in which the alien, ‘imposed’ forms of modernism have been privately or covertly modified by individuals during the life of such buildings, as part of a necessary (and arguably subversive) process of ‘appropriation’ or ‘sublation’, while failing to acknowledge the origins and development of such buildings in a complex social and cultural fabric, and the extent to which they may play a role in concretising and objectifying collective identities and belief systems.

Yet anthropological research into the architectural material culture of traditional, small-scale societies also offers fruitful directions for the study of modern architecture. Levi-Strauss’s structuralist analysis highlighted the role of the individual house building in certain societies as the acknowledged embodiment and objectification of a specific form of social organisation, and, building on his work, Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) emphasise the significance of the house as ‘a prime agent of socialisation. Through habit and inhabiting, each person builds up a practical mastery of the fundamental schemes of their culture’ (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 2). Bourdieu’s study (1977) of the Kabyle house in Algeria, embodying this approach, is well known, but Bloch’s work (1995) on the Zafimaniry house in Madagascar is of particular interest to the following discussion, because it shifts the focus onto the actual
materiality of the building. Bloch suggests that other anthropologists are mistaken in trying to pin down the ‘meaning’, in a strictly symbolic or semiotic interpretation, of traditional carvings on the timber elements of the houses, and suggests a looser, alternative approach, which might be considered more synaesthetic or phenomenological in character – notably, one that highlights the carvings as a natural continuation of the progressive hardening of the materials used to build the house during the progress of a marriage, representing its success and fruitfulness. Bloch’s analysis acknowledges all the senses as the equipment of perception and, moreover, the dynamism and vitality of material phenomena, which might otherwise be considered inert and passive.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued for ‘sense experience’ as ‘that vital communication with the world which makes it present’, forging a bond between ‘the perceived object and the perceiving subject’, termed ‘intentional tissue.’ However, as Thomas Czordas points out (1999), ‘the notion of “experience” virtually dropped out of theorising about culture’ during the 1980s, because of the great emphasis on structuralist analysis, involving the methods of literary criticism and semiotics. He draws attention to the fundamental paradox in this, for: ‘The very possibility of individuation, the creation of the individual that we understand… as at the core of the ideological structure of western culture, has as its condition of possibility a particular mode of inhabiting the world as a bodily being.’ But Czordas also stresses that the process of perception, the ‘deployment of senses and sensibility, and not only their content, is emphatically cultural’ – that is, the way that individuals use their senses, and their particular responses to phenomena – is highly determined by cultural context and conditions.

Czordas’s perspective offers particular potential for a study of modern architecture capable of revealing depths of cultural meaning at individual and collective level that have been largely dismissed as a result of a prevailing discourse of alienation, abstraction and cultural fragmentation, and an emphasis on the notion of imposed, individual authorship. In order to explore this perspective, I therefore adopted the ethnographic method offered by anthropology, privileging the active personal engagement of the anthropologist with individuals and groups at the site of the research in order to understand their relationship with the modernist built environment.
Rationalism or existentialism

In 2000, the government finally decided to list the Brunswick, on the grounds of its architectural and historical significance, as a megastructure. However, the listing decision was challenged by DOCOMOMO-UK (the organisation for documentation of Modern Movement buildings), which asserted that ‘[the] definition [of megastructure] contains only half the concept (Cooke 2000). The other half is the idea of a framework that accepts and assumes change within it over time… The great space-making structure that accommodates the communal spaces and the fundamental relationships of parts is a fix, and the detailed pattern of uses and components within it reflects change.’

DOCOMOMO feared that if listing were to take place, future change and development would be frozen. Its position highlights the problems inherent to a form of architectural discourse that serves to establish fixed, closed interpretations and meaning – in this case those of the megastructure and a brutalist ideology of materials (concrete), which cannot begin to reflect the multi-faceted complexity of meaning embodied in an architectural artefact, or any other material artefact, and in its existence over a period of time. This is especially true of the material culture of the twentieth century, due to the sheer pace of cultural change.

Buchli (1999) argues that ‘most of our interpretative tools [predicated on generally Marxian materialist assumptions within a ‘foundationalist’ tradition of western thought] leave us somewhat at a loss to understand’ the ‘superfluity of meaning’ with which the ‘physical architectural artefact and its attendant metaphors are confusingly and painfully pregnant…’. His viewpoint is, in fact, echoed in the outlook of much contemporary architectural theory, defined by Mary McLeod (2000) as a preoccupation with the concept of ‘other’ or ‘otherness’. But she also points out that there is a continuing neglect of the notion of everyday spaces and everyday life as the significant arena of cultural meaning – the concern of Lefebvre and de Certeau (de Certeau 1998; Lefebvre 2008). McLeod summarises this concern as ‘not only to depict the power of disciplinary technology, but also to reveal how society resists being reduced by it, not just in the unusual or removed places but in the most ordinary’. This involves a focus on ‘the intensification of sensory impressions, the freedom and positive excesses of consumption as experiences that counter the webs of control and monotony in daily life’.

In the case of the Brunswick, such an approach may be viewed as fundamentally opposed to the ‘closed’ modernist framework of thought.
within which the building is conventionally located. Furthermore, this interpretation of the Brunswick as the clearly defined product of a strictly rational, functionalist and scientific approach to architecture, planning and social organisation can be shown to be essentially flawed, even at its origins.

The project to redevelop the Brunswick site, initiated by the developer E. Alec Coleman, was founded on a vision of a thorough-going rationalisation of space and traffic circulation, regardless of the social fabric, which was prevalent in the post-war era (Buchanan 1963). At that time, the site consisted of war-damaged Georgian terraces and small ancillary buildings. Between 1958 and 1960, Coleman made a series of planning applications, which were rejected, but in February 1963 an outline planning scheme by Leslie Martin and Patrick Hodgkinson for a different type of mixed-use, low-rise development housing 1,800 people in five-storey linear blocks was finally approved, following which Hodgkinson was appointed sole architect.

Hodgkinson believed ‘The Foundling Estate presented an opportunity to again bring together living, work and recreation to stimulate each other, against normal practice of the time’ (Hodgkinson 1992) – a view that evokes the beginnings of a sea change in attitudes towards redevelopment and an implicit acknowledgement that, as Tilley (1994) writes, ‘space does not and cannot exist apart from the events and activities within which it is implicated… Socially produced space combines the cognitive, the physical and the emotional… A social space, rather than being uniform and forever the same, is constituted by differential densities of human experience, attachment and involvement.’ Hodgkinson attributes his views to the influence of Sartre’s existentialism. He felt strongly that a modern architecture should concern itself with the psyche of the individual, rather than being a vehicle for socialism. He entertained an essentially romantic imagination about the possibilities of modern architecture as vehicle for living, which challenges the conventional interpretation of the Brunswick as an expression of rationalist abstraction inspired by Le Corbusier.

The early schemes for the Brunswick were socially idealistic, intended to incorporate a wide mixture of people from different social strata, within the equalising framework of a common building type framing a common public space, or ‘town room’. Hodgkinson (1972) described it as ‘a liner without class distinctions on its promenading decks…’ While the image of the ocean liner was also used by Le Corbusier (1923) in his evocation of a new architecture – along with the ‘airplane’ and ‘automobile’ – Le Corbusier was more interested in the aesthetic of
these constructions, ‘a beauty of a more technical order’, than in a concept of social structure, or an aesthetic of social identity.

Hodgkinson’s first scheme was for a series of brick courtyard buildings on an elevated plinth, creating an open-ended configuration of buildings and sheltered spaces capable of redefining a physical and cultural territory suited to the conditions of modern life that could also support and nurture both the collective and the individual psyche. The scheme proposed an existential engagement with a notion of being-in-the-world that had more in common with Heidegger than with Le Corbusier and classic modernism, and had a refinement at odds with the ‘raw’ approach of British brutalism. The stepped section, providing balconies for every flat, was ‘about looking up’ towards the sky – precisely the feature of the Brunswick flats that Sennett interprets as severing the connection between life inside the flats and everyday street-level activities, and a form of alienating abstraction. For Hodgkinson, however, the possibility of living ‘in the clouds’ was something to aspire to, allowing an escape from ‘the frightful buildings around the Brunswick’, including a number of university institutions and various hotels. In other words, it allowed an engagement with an existential awareness of self in the world, in much the terms of the ‘phenomenological reduction’ defined by Merleau-Ponty (1989 [1962]): man’s capacity, as a ‘meditating Ego’, to distinguish himself ‘from the world and things’ and to reflect upon it and wonder at it – a process, which though impossible to achieve completely, ‘reveals that world as strange and paradoxical’.

The use of the ‘winter garden’ concept in the Brunswick scheme was fundamental, then, to the ‘existential’ programme of the project, insofar as it can be defined in such tangible terms. But it is clear that the existential dimension of the design does not work for everyone. Mrs X, who has placed a big table in the glazed area (fig. 2.7), says she can’t believe how lucky she is: ‘The sun in the flat makes me feel so bright.’ Ms Y, on the other hand, has thermally lined curtains permanently closed across the windows, not only to keep the flat both warm and cool, but also to shut out the view of the terraces opposite. She says, ‘I’m not convinced I like the view’ and ‘I don’t want forever to be thinking about it.’ A number of residents stress the importance of the view down into the precinct, because, as one says, ‘The view down “humanises” me and other tenants, as we can see people wandering around’, and others lament the lack of a view of people passing by the kitchen window overlooking the access galleries, suggesting an unfavourable comparison with the traditional street environment.

During the construction of the Brunswick, graffiti was painted on the site hoardings, dubbing it the ‘Bloomsbury Prison’, and certain critics
fiercely condemned the scheme. But not everyone was antagonistic. A year later, the *Daily Telegraph* described it as reminiscent of Mediterranean shores – a stylish, imaginative and exotic intervention that restored the ‘Bloomsbury of a century ago, as a centre for the professional classes’. It reported that the first tenants ‘find it provides a sense of identity. It’s not a question of just living in another block.’ In 1990, the chair of the tenants association, looking back, said, ‘It was an honour to live here, as it was a very elegant block. We thought it was paradise…’ (Johnstone 1972).

It seems clear that many people did, and do, respond to the architect’s ideal of a place that could, in some way, transcend the more banal and depressing aspects of everyday life and provide the possibility of a liberation of the psyche. In 1989, critic David Hamilton Eddy summed up this liberating and magical dimension of the scheme as ‘a dream world, familiar and entrancing and disturbing at once’ which allowed a freedom from the strict social order of Georgian and Victorian London, where ‘everyone is “placed” and knows their “place”; the magic is to do with the escape from the quotidian grind into a poetic and paradisal world’ (Hamilton Eddy 1989).

Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980) set out a theory of a ‘phenomenology of architecture’ based on a definition of architecture as ‘a concretisation of existential space’. He argued that this condition was generated through the transformation of nature into a ‘cultural landscape’ by
man-made elements and settlement patterns, so that construction technology itself became a crucial mediator in the relationship between man and environment and the realisation of its existential dimensions. The ‘existential purpose of building’ is, therefore, to make a site become a place by uncovering its latent and potential meanings. The key referent in Norberg-Schulz’s argument is Heidegger’s concept of dwelling as being-in-the-world, but Merleau-Ponty’s influence is also clearly evident, particularly in the latter’s argument that: ‘For most of us, Nature is no more than a vague and remote entity, overlaid by cities, roads, houses and above all by the presence of other people… The “human world” ceases to be a metaphor and becomes once more… the seat and as it were the homeland of our thoughts…’

Such a concept of building and the purpose of architecture, suggesting a blurring of clearly defined boundaries between subject and object through the notion of place as ‘a qualitative totality’, is fundamentally distinct from the deterministic, functionalist programme with which the Brunswick is often identified, and offers a far more revealing insight into the conception and subsequent evolution of the project. As Norberg-Schulz writes, ‘most modern buildings… live their abstract life in a kind of mathematical–technological space’, identifying lack of enclosure and density, loss of imageability, and weak ‘presence’ of new buildings as typical characteristics of ‘place today’, which drain it of existential meaning. The following discussion seeks to make clear that these are not characteristics of the Brunswick, analysed as a ‘concrete totality’ of phenomena, or manifestation of embodied cultural meaning in various aspects.

**Phenomenology**

Norberg-Schulz defined a clear set of criteria by which, he suggested, the phenomenological identity of architecture could be analysed. He proposed that any study of man-made place should take as its point of departure its relationship to the natural environment, then proceed to an examination of its formal articulation and the ways in which basic temporal structures are translated into spatial properties. He stated that the matter of structure must be examined in concrete terms, to give the phenomenology of architecture a ‘realistic basis’, focusing on enclosure, ‘standing and rising’ (structure, proportion, relationship to ground and sky) and materiality (Norberg-Schulz 1980).

Norberg-Schulz’s approach is interesting for its aspiration towards precision and the continuing evidence of an interest in establishing a
scientifically respectable footing for a ‘phenomenology of architecture’ –
even though he states that he has moved away from the ‘methods taken
over from natural science’ which he used in his earlier book, *Intentions in
Architecture*, and he makes it clear that the notion of ‘existential space’
is ‘not a logico-mathematical term’. He asserts the urgency of returning
to ‘a qualitative, phenomenological understanding of architecture’, but
nevertheless, the terminology used in identifying the purpose of the
book as ‘the conquest of the existential dimension’ suggests a lingering
sense of scientific mission (Norberg-Schulz 1980).

The methods that Norberg-Schulz outlines continue to emphasise
the visual, aesthetic and symbolic qualities of architecture as the basis for
a structuralist type of interpretation, with particular attention paid to
identifying archetypal symbolic forms representing man’s place in a
cosmic order. He does not really begin to address a concept of synaes-
thesia, or multi-sensory experience of the world, which Merleau-Ponty
(1989 [1962]) described as the ‘rich notion of sense experience’, generating
the ‘connecting tissue between perceived object and perceiving subject’.

The architect and writer Juhani Pallasmaa complained in 1994 that
‘The architecture of our time is turning into the retinal art of the eye’
(Pallasmaa 2005), proposing seven realms of sensory experience as the
framework for perception of architecture: acoustic intimacy, silence, scent,
touch, taste, physical movement, and scale and gravity. He asserted the
need to acknowledge the ‘language and wisdom of the body’, but, as
Czordas (1999) points out, individual and collective bodily experience
and perception are in themselves strongly coloured – if not actually
determined – by cultural factors, which have to be taken into account. And,
as Abram (1996) has proposed, the imagination too must be understood
as ‘an attribute of the senses… Not a separate mental faculty’, which is a
fundamental part of the perceptual apparatus: ‘the perceiving body…
lending its imagination to things in order to see them more fully’. Mind and
body together, then, tie a person to the natural and built environment
in, as Seamon (n.d.) puts it, an ‘intentional relationship’ which can be
analysed in three dimensions – ‘lifeworld, place, and home’ – underlining
the phenomenological significance of architecture.

The discussion so far has touched on two crucial factors governing
the design of the Brunswick, namely the importance of the view of the
sky, or the bodily relationship with an infinite realm of light above, and
the concept of the site as an open-ended, permeable terrain of solids and
voids, continuous with the surrounding urban and cultural landscape,
as opposed to one large, enclosed and impermeable block. I would
suggest that both factors demonstrate the architect’s awareness of the
phenomenological dimensions of the project. However, they must also be understood as developing out of a complex web of cultural and economic influences and conditions that defined both the brief and the response, and are not simply the result of an act of individual authorship. Indeed, this understanding represents a fundamental premise of any analysis of architecture that proceeds on the basis of a wide-ranging understanding of materiality and embodiment, as opposed to a narrowly defined, aesthetic and intellectual concept, and should become evident from the following discussion of a community’s direct experience and perception of the Brunswick, and the cultural dimensions of that experience.

**Spatial hierarchy: layered realms of existence**

Ethnographic field work at the Brunswick revealed that the architecture establishes a spatial hierarchy that is experienced by residents, at a physical and psychological level, as a clear layering of distinct realms of existence within both a localised and globalised world. In other words, it seems that the experience of living in this set piece of modern architecture does have the potential to generate a meaningful sense of self-identity and place within a larger urban and cultural order, which has little relation to the notion of alien abstraction embedded within the discourse around modernist material culture.

One of the epithets most frequently used by residents to describe their experience of living in the Brunswick was that of the ‘concrete jungle’. This metaphor suggests a maze of routes and a proliferation of different concrete elements – a spatial hierarchy that is not easily deciphered, and a mass of material components that is overwhelming in its sensory impact. Yet, at the same time, the use of the word ‘jungle’ suggests a certain grandeur of scale and conception that provokes some kind of admiration. The lofty verticality of the A-frame structure from within is undeniably impressive. Furthermore, the flats themselves were repeatedly described as ‘beautiful’, setting a standard of ‘luxury’ compared with the standard of other rented council housing. As a result, there has been a lively market in private sales, particularly on the top floors with the best views, to professional middle-class incomers.

While residents’ experience of the grandeur of the Brunswick is strongly shaped by its vertical qualities, users of the shopping precinct below get a very different impression. Here, the complex reads at an almost exclusively horizontal level as a pedestrian route across the precinct and a line of vision firmly directed along the horizontal lines of
the ranked glazed terraces of housing, glinting in the light. Experienced in this way, the Brunswick precinct was often described as too wide to be comfortable: a prairie of a piazza, rather than the ‘town-room’ evoked by Hodgkinson, a space which the angled set-back of the housing terraces above allowed to ‘escape’ rather than enclosing adequately. This perceived failing was addressed by bringing forward the columns of the arcade in 2006 to create a more contained public space.

By comparison, the upstands of the A-frame structure framing the centre of the residential blocks are comparable in scale to ancient forest trees or the soaring buttresses and vaults of medieval cathedrals. Framed by this tall, narrow space, at level C (the internal street), a person is revealed as a small figure, while the stacked access galleries overhead host small clusters of people around front doors on different levels, who appear to be clinging to the sides of the walls like crustaceans on the bows of a ship.

When Mrs A’s friend suggested that the Brunswick was like a ‘big ship’, the metaphor completely changed Mrs A’s feelings about living in the Brunswick, which had been mainly negative. Initially she found the fact that the front doors to the flats did not open onto the precinct, where her young son used to ride his bicycle, very problematic in terms of meeting people, and she felt generally ‘very detached’ from the building. But ironically, it was the threat, as she saw it, to the building itself in the 1990s which led her to become more involved. She was incensed by what she calls the ‘lean-to’ scheme for a block of new flats built across and in the space of the Brunswick Square portico, and in her letter of objection described the Brunswick as ‘one of the most wonderful pieces of architecture’.

Mrs A described the ‘fight-back’ against the developers as one of the most important events in her life. In a sense it created an idea of a real and viable community threatened by the freeholder. But at the same time it drew out divisions. Residents of Foundling Court queried why support should be given to O’Donnell Court over the ‘lean-to’ building, when O’Donnell had not supported Foundling in its battle to stop the hotel opposite building additional storeys which would block light and views out towards the horizon from the upper levels. This perceived division was crystallised by Mr M when he referred to ‘the two estates’.

In the original scheme, the continuity of the terraces around the roof of the central shopping hall should have created a sense of unity between the two buildings, but as it was built, without the shopping hall, the sense of connection between the two sides was sustained only by two narrow footbridges, which have now been removed altogether.
For Mrs C, Foundling was definitely inhabited by ‘a better class of people’, on account of its direct relationship with Marchmont Street, its shops and post office, where people meet and consolidate social relationships. O'Donnell Court, by contrast, addresses the relatively abstract, even though more beautiful, space of Brunswick Square. For years, the shops of the precinct itself were too specialised, except for the old supermarket and perhaps one of the cafes, to provide a regular common meeting-ground for both sides of the complex – and many of the retail units stood empty for some time before the 2006 refurbishment.

Even within each block, there was a clear sense that the spatial design structured and differentiated the Brunswick ‘community’, so that perceptions of it as either ‘cliquey’, or lacking in any sense of community at all, were voiced. The vertical grandeur of the common internal space underlines the hierarchical layering of floors towards the light and views at the top of the main block, but the obstruction of the line of vision upwards by the concrete upstands means there is no view of what happens on each floor, and therefore little integration between them. Each floor then tends to operate as a separate community, with the top floors regarded as considerably more desirable than the second to fourth floors, where more burglaries are reported to take place because of the comparative lack of daylight. The tangible effect of this ordering is that the flats on the top floors have sold better on the private market, establishing a distinct, socially differentiated group at the top of the building. Some of this group described themselves as ‘refugees’ from other areas of the city, especially in west London, gentrified in advance of Holborn and Kings Cross, who came in search of ‘real neighbourliness’ and ‘a sense of humanity’, as one respondent put it. Many were architects and designers, buying into the building’s architectural significance. Some, however, found the necessity of social mixing imposed by the vertical access through the building painful and unwelcome, such as Mrs E, who stated that she would prefer not to be forced into proximity with, and awareness of, the ‘creeping working classes’. Others noted with dislike but resignation the high maintenance bills charged to ‘home-owners’ by Camden’s Housing Department in order to subsidise its tenants.

In this scenario, the lifts (fig. 2.8) played a crucial integrating social role in the building’s history. Mrs E described them as important meeting-points, where conversations between neighbours on different floors could take place, albeit briefly, and acquaintanceships were initiated. Yet at the same time, they were places of confrontation and risk. ‘Nobody wants to get in a lift with someone they don’t know’, explained Mrs D. Stories of muggings were rife, involving strangers
pushing through the entrance doors and into the lifts behind residents, and a prevalent discourse of security, or lack of it, and fear in the blocks crystallised around the vertical mechanism of the lift, often judged unreliable in itself.

Such narratives and perceptions seem to confirm the often-cited judgement that ‘streets in the sky’ do not work at a social level, even though they may make striking architectural compositions. Mrs E said she felt as though she was always seeing the long access gallery leading from the lift to her front door, and way beyond it past many other front doors (fig. 2.9), through the lens of a camera. But the spatial language of the street itself was also often used – so-and-so is ‘across the road’ – and most respondents seemed to be familiar and on reasonably friendly terms with their neighbours, usually known to them by name. The aspect of the spatial order that was most commonly criticised is the lack of a proper outlook onto the ‘street’. As the site superintendent put it, ‘The front door is at the back of the flat’, and, ‘On your balcony you only see your immediate neighbour.’ He said, ‘The community spirit was lost in the design’; but, nevertheless, ‘The mix here is brilliant’, and it is ‘a city sitting in itself’. He said, ‘Everything was here... it was good... living on top of the high street.’

The tension between the private domestic and public domains within the building is tangible. Sharon Marcus (1999) has outlined the

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**Fig. 2.8** View of internal circulation spaces, Foundling Court, 2001. Source: author
Fig. 2.9 View through second floor access gallery to flats (perimeter block, Foundling Court) 2001. Source: author
discourse of the apartment building and identified the apartment building as an undesirable building type in nineteenth-century London, for the reason that multi-occupancy of subdivided buildings was seen to fundamentally transgress values of permanence, stability and moral rectitude that could only be sustained against the amoral values of the market place within the insulated cocoon of the family. The very concept of the shared apartment building was considered to undermine the sanctity of the private, introverted family unit. The spatial design of the Brunswick, however, seems to generate a condition of privacy within the flats themselves that was spoken of by occupants in both positive and negative terms. On the one hand, the lack of acoustic seepage between dwellings was noted as a benefit, but on the other, respondents spoke of feeling ‘cut off’ in their flats – of the building as ‘alienating’, ‘a shambles, far too big’, with ‘no camaraderie’. One described it as ‘a very cruel building’, where people ‘watch and listen, but don’t do anything, and then gossip’ – a building of invisible eyes and ears and whispering, but no visible community spirit, manifested most strikingly in the empty public spaces of level 2 – the internal street, and the terraces.

These evidently discreet dwellings are, however, by no means congruent with the family unit, and the unsuitability of the Brunswick for family life is often spoken of, despite the fact that Brunswick does house numbers of families, some, particularly immigrant families, with four or more children. Since none of the flats has more than two bedrooms, many of the first, local, generation of residents moved out when their children, if they had two of different sex, became too old to share a bedroom. Mrs X also suggested that the kitchen was too small to eat in as a family, and most people felt it should have taken up some of the unnecessary space allocated to the living room. The shoulder-height partition between the two spaces was ‘good’, because she could look over while working in the kitchen to keep an eye on her boys playing in the living room, but she closed the gap off with glass in her flat, apparently finding the ambiguity of the spatial segregation troublesome. Several respondents also referred to an antipathy on the part of many residents towards children, which resulted in the use of the terraces as play areas being forbidden, and their resulting virtual redundancy as public space.

The former estate manager described the limited spatial range of accommodation at the Brunswick as a serious problem for the cohesion of the community, in that it provided no scope for people to stay in the building throughout their lives, thus eroding family connections and placing undue pressure on the council’s community welfare services. She wrongly claims that the original speculative design was not meant to
accommodate families at all, but only ‘business people’ – a misconception echoed in another respondent’s claim that the Brunswick was built as ‘holiday flatlets’ – but both claims underline a pervasive attitude towards the Brunswick as not being designed with families in mind.

On the other hand, the Brunswick provides a structure for a different sort of community, one in which people without family ties can, by all accounts, make themselves at home within a loose, relatively anonymous framework that also allows a sense of communal identity. Half of the housing accommodation is designated ‘sheltered’, so 50 per cent of residents live independently in their flats, within easy reach of a ‘warden’. The wardens themselves assert that ‘the best thing about the Brunswick is that you can remain anonymous’. Although most of the elderly are housed in one-bedroom flats and studios on the ground to second floors (opening onto the internal street and terraces), which are clearly identified with the elderly community, other people may be housed anywhere within the spatial hierarchy, avoiding any immediate identification with the ‘sheltered’ population. In this case, it seems apparent that it is precisely those spatial characteristics of the Brunswick prompting its description as a ‘shambles’ or a ‘concrete jungle’ that provide the possibility of an anonymous existence in the crowd and freedom from gossip for those whose existence in a more spatially integrated, close-knit community could be difficult.

But it is also this dimension of the Brunswick community – the possibility and awareness of free-floating, unaccountable elements – that has generated a powerfully pervasive discourse of security during its history. The lack of protection from confrontational transgressive behaviours was graphically perceived in terms of a building that was too permeable, full of odd crevices and leftover hidden spaces and underused public spaces that attract colonisation by ‘undesirables’. The most dramatic expression of this dimension of the ‘community’ was the underground world of homeless residency and transgressive activity that developed early on in the two basement levels of the complex on a basis of such permanence that many ‘residents’ would give their address, for social security purposes, as The Ramp, and receive their post there. The site superintendent detailed in precise terms the material characteristics of the buildings that facilitated such occupation, and noted the social segregation between the east and west sides of the service ramp, the east side benefiting from the ‘hot air from the Safeway freezer extract’: ‘They also used the fire hoses to shower under and wash their clothes, the clothing was then hung up to dry under the hot air.’ But this level of domestic harmony, as it might be perceived, began to break
down during the 1980s as the underground community became increasingly violent and aggressive, resulting in an ‘attempted murder’ charge and a destructive invasion of the whole labyrinthine area, including switch and plant rooms.

This dark realm of urban existence beneath the Brunswick seems to represent the inverse of the realm of light, reaching towards the sky above, but also seeping into the whole building. A tenant of the ‘professional chambers’, now studio units, on the terrace level, summed it up as a problem of ‘uncontextualised places being taken over by uncontextualised people’. Yet the first generation of residents at the Brunswick were predominantly local; they had been born and brought up on or near the site, had watched the building being erected and, in many cases, had specifically requested to be rehoused in the new flats. For Mrs X, who moved in when newly married and pregnant, there was nothing ‘uncontextual’ about the Brunswick; everyone was local, and many of her new neighbours had known her as a child. Mary, in her 90s at the time of the research, was living nearby when the Brunswick was being built; she used to talk to all the builders, and was determined to see what the new flats were like to live in. When she moved in, she knew lots of people – ‘We’d have cups of tea round each other’s flats’.

Most respondents suggested that problems with social cohesion and order at the Brunswick had less to do with the architecture of the building than with the housing policy of the local council, widely perceived as ‘moving anybody in’ – people ‘who don’t come from London’ – without due consideration for the community there already. Yet at the same time, there was a pervasive sense of reliance, even dependence, on the council as an institution, not only for the welfare of the residential community, but also, in some sense, for its very identity as a cohesive group. This is clearly revealed in a discourse of ‘domestic complaint’, which closely parallels that identified by Marcus (1999) as a persistent feature of the literature of housing and the leasehold system in nineteenth-century London. The institution of the council itself, via the estate manager, is constantly criticised and even reviled for its lack of reliability, promptness and general failure to bring such problems under control. Mr M thought there was a problem with a ‘dependency culture’, insofar as the council’s tenants could be divided into two types: those who were not particularly happy to be council tenants, but were obliged to accept their situation because of their circumstances, like himself (living with his disabled sister), and those who were ‘determined to be for their whole lives’.

This perception of the council, suggesting a dimension of kinship, was reflected in the attitude of some tenants and their children who,
according to one respondent, regard their parents’ flats as their ‘birth right’. While Mr M believed this relationship between tenants and their landlord derives from an outdated notion of councils as ‘universal providers’, it is also arguably, and perhaps more potently, rooted in a very real sense of a geographical, or spatial, identity under threat. The council effectively represented and activated an expression of locality and community which, in many ways, has been eroded by the transient nature of London’s population and the influx of outsiders, many of whom do not consider their London residences as their primary homes. According to a community worker, most of the Bangladeshi families who had recently arrived in the borough and been allocated flats in the Brunswick and other local authority blocks regarded their accommodation as ‘somewhere to stay’, while ‘home’ continued to be in Bangladesh. Such people, she suggested, may have very little idea about the terms of their tenancies and their everyday responsibilities for maintaining their accommodation and common areas in good condition; this in turn leads to tension with other residents who distinguish themselves by the longevity of their residence in the building and their status as long-term council tenants.

Yet the level of spatial identification between the building of the Brunswick, the institution of the council both as landlord and welfare provider, and a notion of localised community is confused by the historic division of the complex into two ownerships in 1965, when the housing in its entirety, plus the professional chambers on the terrace level, were leased by the council, leaving the commercial parts of the building in private ownership. The situation was described by a council tenant of the studio units as ‘upstairs, downstairs’: a spatial description with a strong implication of social hierarchy. The ambiguities of the relationship between the upper, middle and precinct levels emerged as a key issue in the identity of the building as a whole when the freehold and commercial components were sold in 1999. Most respondents expressed a view that the new freeholder had a moral obligation to consult with the residential tenants of the Brunswick about their plans for upgrading and refurbishing the commercial areas of the building, and to proceed with work as soon as possible for the benefit of residents. There was a clear sense that the precinct and its shops existed primarily to serve the needs of residents, a view significantly at odds with that of the developer.

For the freeholder, the public and commercial space of the Brunswick represented much less a space of local and domestic identity than a site of engagement with a far broader community of users,
including tourists, students, office workers and commuters, symbolically located at the historic centre of a cosmopolitan city on a globalised stage. Their perception of the Brunswick as a localised focus of universal interests, and the corresponding execution of plans to upgrade the complex, aspired to resurrect the original intention of the development as a grand, formal axis and public space between nodes of mass transportation, which even, at one stage, included a passenger terminal for Heathrow. In a very real sense, the tense relationship between the two landlords and their tenant communities has symbolised a conflict between spatially defined identities – the local and the global – which is embodied in the very fabric of the Brunswick as a building, and is manifested in the 2006 alterations.

The Brunswick can thus be read as a strongly contested site or series of territories embodied in clearly differentiated spatial realms or layers of existence. The spatial ordering of the building may therefore be understood not simply as a condition of its architectural conception and aesthetic, but also as an active framework for the social ordering and evolution of the complex in close relation to political and economic circumstances and other urban processes such as gentrification and migration. The question of how it ‘concretises’ the community or communities that inhabit ‘existential space’ through its architectural spaces is complex and full of subtleties that are disallowed by conventional architectural discourse in its concern to establish a fixed interpretation of form.

One of the newer tenants introduced to the commercial precinct prior to the refurbishment was Myrtle – an advertising and media agency instantly recognisable as ‘other’ in the context of the more established retail uses of the complex – which has now moved on. Myrtle wanted to be ‘somewhere which reflected the people we deal with on a daily basis’, and which allowed it to ‘be in touch with a real community’. At the same time, Myrtle described the Brunswick as being ‘like some giant spaceship landed in genteel Bloomsbury, really cool’: a carefully defined, media-generated image that had little relation to the perceptions of the people who lived there, or indeed to the original intentions of the development and its architecture, but which has made it attractive to film-makers (including Antonioni, who set a scene from The Passenger, 1975, on its steps) on numerous occasions during its lifetime. It is clear then that the Brunswick, understood as a complex of material and spatial phenomena rather than as a fixed intellectual imposed idea, offers the possibility of multiple readings and meanings to different groups of people, framed by the cultural conditions of any given moment.
Conclusion

One of the most significant signs of the Brunswick’s legitimacy and vitality as a vehicle of cultural meaning has been the evident extent of its appeal to the imagination of both the immediate community – evoked in the use of metaphors of the ship, paradise, Mediterranean shores, Gardens of Babylon, and others – but also of the wider society that produced it, and continues to live through it, manifested most obviously in the numerous films that have been shot within its boundaries. Abram (1996) stresses the importance of recognising the imagination as a fundamental part of the perceptual apparatus that allows the body to see things more fully. The Brunswick’s appeal to the imagination, both at an individual and a collective level, may be interpreted as a significant measure of its success as a channel of ‘sense experience’ and, through that, ‘communication with the world’, as defined by Merleau-Ponty (1989 [1962]).

Notwithstanding Camden Council’s explicit socially motivated agenda in acquiring the housing at the Brunswick as part of an initiative to reinstate family life in the Holborn area, and regardless of the estate’s long-standing and well-documented problems in functioning properly as a viable mixed-use development incorporating both public and private spaces, the experience of life ‘inside’ the Brunswick has not really entered the public domain as the subject of discourse in its own right. As a place in the urban landscape, perceived from within as a container of disparate people linked (or not) in space by many different threads rather than observed from without as an external profile or aesthetic form, the Brunswick represents a multi-layered, multi-vocal social setting with its own internal dynamic that exists autonomously of the evaluation of the building both as a significant work of architecture within a particular European strand of modernist architectural history, and as a landmark of national post-war cultural and urban heritage. Nevertheless, the architecture of the Brunswick also provides an expressive and inescapable environmental framework for the social life that subsists within it, infused with material agency. It not only outlines, but also dramatically draws attention to, a particular territory and offers a certain definition – an aesthetic of social identity – to the lives and relationships of the people who inhabit and invest it with meaning in the wider context of an increasingly commercialised yet contested city.
Methodological note

The material for this study was generated from a study of historical archive material, combined with numerous observation sessions and personal semi-structured interviews carried out between August 2000 and June 2001, then again between 2004 and 2006, both on and off the site of the Brunswick. These included tenants’ meetings and interviews with the architect, Patrick Hodgkinson, residents of the flats, tenants of commercial premises at the Brunswick, and various people having an official involvement with running and making decisions directly and indirectly about the future of the Brunswick.

The archive material held at the Holborn Library Local Archive Centre and by the Planning Department at Camden Council included a very large number of revealing letters written by residents and non-residents during the course of the planning consultations held in connection with two earlier proposals for refurbishment during the 1990s. Another valuable source was the press cuttings file, dating back to the start of the project, held by Patrick Hodgkinson, which included most of the key architectural critiques published over the Brunswick’s lifetime. In addition, I was given access to the uncatalogued archive of Hodgkinson’s drawings and documents relating to the project, which he had recently gifted to the RIBA Drawings Collection, and which was to be slowly put in order during the course of my own research.

During the periods of field work, I passed through the Brunswick Centre almost daily in my comings and goings around the local area, and registered my impressions of a building I already knew well at different times of day and in contrasting lights and weather conditions. I used the underground car park, shopped in the precinct, and stopped at one or other of the cafes to observe the everyday activities on the site, until the radical disruption of construction work made that impossible and created a different kind of environment to negotiate. I installed myself for a two-week period, house-sitting a flat in Foundling Court, so that I could experience the Brunswick from the inside, at first hand, and familiarise myself with its semi-public and private spaces. In July 2005, the even more radical disruption of the bomb blast at nearby Russell Square tube, followed by local street closures and appeals for information on the missing, many pictured in photographs fastened to the Brunswick’s site hoardings, cast a terrible pall over my field-site. Yet, by the following year, the building had been transformed into a new ‘high street for Bloomsbury’, its stained concrete facades gone for ever under a thick veneer of cream paint, and the re-glazed winter gardens sparkling more
brightly than before as a new Waitrose supermarket opened its doors to the public, blocking off one end of the formerly open precinct.

I was aware that my resident respondents were almost equally split between a long-standing ‘indigenous’ community of council tenants, some of whom who had subsequently bought their flats under ‘right to buy’ legislation in the 1980s, and a more recent incoming professional community of owner-occupiers (accounting for only one-sixth of total occupants in 2001). There was a predominance of female respondents. While the former included tenants who were anxious about being displaced by the refurbishment, the latter were anticipating a significant increase in the value of their property and equity. My evidence for the experience of newer incoming tenants housed by the council, including a significant proportion of ethnic minority households (particularly Bangladeshi), people with physical and mental health problems, and ex-offenders, was largely gleaned at third hand through official parties, due to a mix of communication and translation problems and people’s fears of being reported to the social benefits authorities.

Over time and successive interviews, I got to know some of these people quite well. In 2006, I put on a slide exhibition of our photographs of the interiors of many of their homes, a constellation of unique little domestic worlds concealed behind the external public face of the Brunswick and within its industrial-scale concrete structure. The exhibition was mounted in a basement service space of the building, providing a glimpse inside the everyday lives of the people who knew it best. It also provided an unlikely backdrop for the developers’ official re-opening of the shopping precinct, which was framed by a rhetoric of regeneration in which a resounding critique of architectural modernism and urbanism was implicit. That encounter between life subjectively experienced on the inside and the dispassionate, objectifying view from outside encapsulated the value of bringing an anthropological perspective to bear on the impact of the modernist legacy on urban experience.

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