

CRANBROOK ESTATE

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photos by Steven Day
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In the same way as philosophy changes and illuminates various aspects of existence, so art and architecture in parallel reflect the same doubts, hopes and aspirations. Berthold Lubetkin¹

In the 1950s on nearly seventeen acres of slum-cleared land and post-war rubble left in the wake of aerial bombings, Berthold Lubetkin designed one of the largest housing redevelopments of its time. The Cranbrook Estate, part of the larger Bethnal Green redevelopment in East London, stands as the culmination of a succession of radical housing projects imagined by Lubetkin throughout his career. This design of this particular housing scheme constitutes a continuous diagonal weave—an ensemble of buildings that face one another (figure 1). At the center, interlocking tower blocks stand shoulder to shoulder with blocks that recede in height and reach out to a row of diminutive bungalows. The shape of

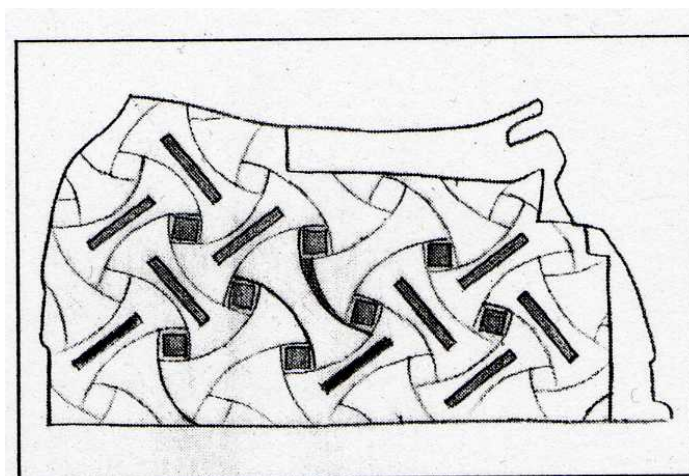


Figure 1: Lubetkin's sketch of Cranbrook as an interlacing of towers in a continuous weave.²

the design—the weave and the decreasing scale of the architecture—can be seen as metaphors explored in Steven Day's photographic series, *Cranbrook Estate*³. For the last two years, Day has documented the private experience of public architecture at Cranbrook and the resulting photographs show how years of

dwelling have woven daily practices into the architectural. Lubetkin's intellectually ambitious goals to improve society through design linger in Day's images. Yet, as the photographs veer from panoramic, monumental shots toward more intimate perspectives, the durability of the buildings merges with a slowly unfolding vulnerability. The buildings take on a ghost-like character as they are reflected by or softened through the glass of a window. The images explore how the social ambitions of the architect haunt the space and how the residents reconfigure the idealism of an earlier era through everyday practices.

Although Lubetkin's social ambitions—"my ambition is not simply to build architecturally, but to build socialistically as well"⁴—had clear affinity with the belief that environmental reform could lead to social reform, his interpretation of how to achieve these goals deviated from typical modernist grammar. Drawing from constructivism, Marxism, and the Beaux Arts tradition among others, Lubetkin distilled key ideas and merged them in a manner that certainly embodied the dominant dynamics of modernism, while also transgressing this school of thought. Lubetkin, in fact, was critical of much modernist architecture and was more concerned with metaphoric representations of—rather than direct involvement in—the processes of social change.⁵ He hoped his work would trigger an emotional and sensual response to rationality.⁶ Lubetkin felt the rationality assumed by modernist planning was alienating. In response, he stressed the importance and value of aesthetic practice in dwelling:

Naturally any staircase is a sort of machine to climb up or to descend, but in the best Beaux Arts interpretation it is a display, it is a dance; and it certainly enriches the conception of human surroundings and the body if architecture can bring in everyday experience a sort of ballet-like quality—semi-poetic choice—in what otherwise is a purely utilitarian conception... the purpose is not only to climb up and down—it is also to enjoy it in a sort of organic way.⁷

Day, through his photographic inquiry at Cranbrook, extends this critique through a contemporary lens. The images in the series echo Heidegger's question: does building (both the process of building and the buildings themselves) hold any guarantee that dwelling occurs?⁸ The photographs in this series explore the potential for dwelling ("presencing") and locate the lyrical in the everyday, illuminating Heidegger's notion (also shared by Lubetkin) that "poetry is what really lets us dwell."⁹ Day's series subtly reveals

the poetic possibilities for dwelling in the grounds and interiors of the housing estate. The emphasis on poetics problematizes the familiar discourse that modernist architecture has failed—failed ordinary people, failed to achieve social goals, and failed in an aesthetic sense.¹⁰ The experiential nature of the photos in *Cranbrook Estate* complicates these notions of failure by showing how the lived experience of the estate’s residents exceeds the disciplinary order imposed through spatial organization.

Yet, in his exploration of experience, Day does not sacrifice an architectural perspective. Rather, he gives voice to the experiential *through* material structures and objects. The photographs evoke presence. In the images the towers maintain a demeanor more looming than monumental—the towers *haunt* the space. For example, in “Mobling House, Private Residence,” one gets the distinct impression that the tower seen through the window is itself peering into the interior space. The architecture provides more than an aesthetic backdrop or stage for the photographs. Rather than an empty container waiting to be filled with the experiences and lives of the residents, the built environment embodies and expresses a vitality that Day captures through the framing and composition of each image. Interestingly, this resonates with Lubetkin’s vision that buildings should engage in dialogue across space (figure 2).

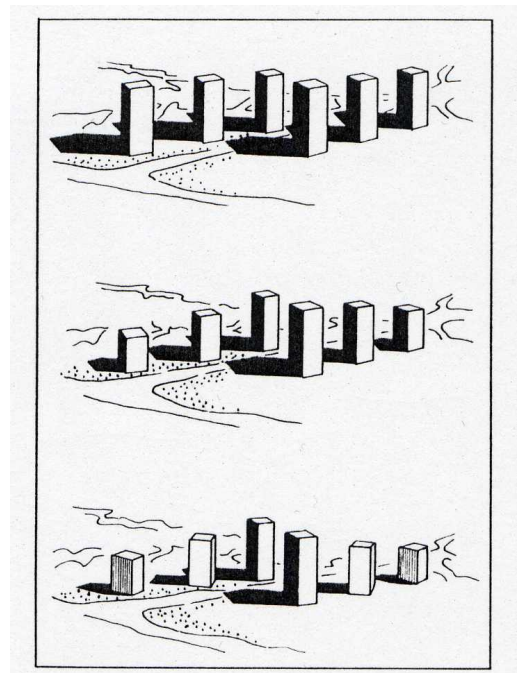


Figure 2: Lubetkin’s pedagogical sketch showing progressive modification of six equal towers to become “members of a family group in conversation with each other.”¹¹

The architectural environment in the photos is not simply anthropomorphized, but resonates with a more pervasive animate quality—architecture not just *for* living things, but also *as* living things. Much architectural photography (that with modernism as its subject, in particular) tends towards imagery that idealizes the structures as instruments responsible for creating a cohesive social totality. The *Cranbrook* series reflects a different mood and approach, one that does not shy away from the ephemeral and the contingent. The portraits from the series embrace these qualities. The subjects—Sam, Karim, Joan, and the others—seem to be stopping only briefly as they pass through the communal space. Rather than freezing a moment in time, the images extend time in either direction, stressing movement more than stasis. If the photos evoke a sense of movement (perhaps reflective of Lubetkin’s ambition to “make buildings move”), it is one that achieves continuity only through a series of associations that draw fragments into an assemblage that feels like a narrative.

Day possesses a strong sense of color and uses this as a link to create coherence between the individual images. The greens—a verdant tree on a small flag, the geometric panels of the façades, two facing doormats, small patches of grass sprouting between the concrete and cobblestones, a girl’s top, a woman’s sweater, paint chipping from the railings, matte stucco—are visually captivating and provide a textural quality. Associations with green (as warm, environmental, natural) also function to offset the gray (cold rationality) of the built environment. Connecting color with light and shape, Day reveals hidden grace amidst soiled bricks, rusty pipes, and crumbling signage. The photos raise questions regarding the changed character of modernist idea(l)s as they face the wear and tear of time and use—innovation complicated by actual living.

These buildings become modernist ruins with a specific moment and context of contemplation...What is foregrounded by the decay of these edifices is the contradiction between the purpose of the modernist structure as the embodiment of the new and the tangible display of its datedness in the midst of the cultural transformations.¹²

Yet, these details of deterioration are not used simply as metaphors for modernist optimism made dog-eared through the passing of time and ideals, but are presented in the photos almost as ornamental

embellishments to the iconic asceticism of modernism. These elements express the additive qualities of dwelling that are both imaginative and unpredictable.

“Bethnal Green Street” provides a panoramic view of the housing scheme. The composition of the photo draws the viewer in and stirs a curiosity for more detail. Day anticipates this desire and unfolds the space in subsequent photographs that provide various registers of experience. What he reveals is a cagey narrative that is more a provocation than a solid story. Although each image reveals what feels like an experience, viewers are prompted to provide their own context for each vignette. The themes and subjects explored in this series are not new, but are a continuation of Day’s earlier work. His projects involve an ongoing concern with dialogue between architectural constructions and their inhabitants.¹³ *Ghost Town* (2007-2009), *Whiteout* (2006) and *Night and Day* (2008-2009), clearly explore remnants and traces—how we inhabit in the contemporary urban context and how what we leave behind also defines dwelling. These themes are central in *Upper City* (2005-2006) and *Hospital* (2002)¹⁴ but with a more focused look at the ghost-like presence that settles in forgotten architecture. There are multiple ways the work in the *Cranbrook* series (along with Day’s other photographic projects) could be classified—anthropological, architectural, documentarian—but the work is less about the ethnographic threads or the structure of the architecture or the documentation of some sort of ‘evidence’ and is more about the exploration of experience.

In *Cranbrook*, Day deals with questions of experience using what Walter Benjamin calls the “dialectical image.” As a method, the dialectical image captures historical process through the use of images. Benjamin argues that history decays into images, not into stories. Through images we can explore the dialectic between now and then and, in this way, we can better communicate experience. The dialectical image involves a sudden, momentary flash, where ordinary objects (usually refuse, detritus) from the past are “rescued” through appearance in the now. The dialectical image may appear as an isolated fragment but is, in fact, waiting to constitute a constellation (a montage) that can tell us something about the present in relation to the past.¹⁵ The photo, “Intercom, Modeling House,” shows a

“Status System” intercom, a relic from the era of the housing unit’s origin. The intercom is topped with a miniature Lebanese flag and other household items that evidence the contemporary context and highlight today’s increased mobility of people and goods. A similar quality pervades “Alzette House.” Here the dated architecture of the building’s entrance is flanked by two recognizably contemporary figures—a man hunched over his mobile phone and a girl whose appearance clearly places her in the present day.

Benjamin argues that meaning can be revealed through decay. In *Cranbrook Estate* the decay is apparent in the weeping brick facades, peeling paint, and rusting metal fixtures that characterize the images. Even the shining sun cannot hide the melancholic aura of the estate. In one photo, two young girls dressed in uniforms seem prematurely destined for working class labor. Other figures take on the hardened look of the architecture in their demeanor. Leaden skies cast a gray hue on surfaces. Yet, there is an incongruous air of domesticity, a sense of a lived-in space that is both familiar *and* strange, alienating *and* inviting. The series presents and plays with this sense of the uncanny. Unoccupied, unhomey (*unheimlich*) interiors somehow simultaneously convey a homely (*heimlich*) presence. Oddly, “Mace Street,” conveys a homey, comfortable feeling even though shot from a distant, bird’s eye perspective. The spectral qualities of the double—another characteristic of the uncanny—also emerge in the series. This is most evident in the image of two girls (aptly titled, “Two Girls”) leaning against a brick retaining wall. Not only do their figures represent a doubling, but also the image recalls iconic images of twins from popular culture—Diane Arbus’s “Identical Twins, Roselle, N.J.” or the twins from Kubrick’s “The Shining.” Similarly, the inter-generational doubles of Joan and Sam and Karim and Ahmed express the uncanny via a temporal perspective. The way in which the estate’s buildings face one another poses an almost eerie manifestation of the double, and Day captures this in window reflections and broader architectural shots. Of equal spectral quality, two interior doors (numbers 44 and 41) stand facing one another in a vacant lobby.

The scenes depicted in *Cranbrook Estate* take ordinary subject matter and present meditations on possibilities for dwelling. Throughout the series, historical tensions and contemporary angst lurk (almost tenderly) in images that suggest alienation, repression and a host of other anxieties. However, the tone of the photos presents a homely familiarity along with the unhomely—as Day notes: “Many tenants approached me, curiously asking why I was documenting the buildings. These encounters began a variety of conversations about living in the Cranbrook Estate. After we said our goodbyes, as they turned and began walking away, I would sometimes spontaneously ask if I could take their picture.” Social moments decayed into images.

¹ Lubetkin in conversation with John Allan in October 1970. See John Allan (1992) “Bertold Lubetkin: Architecture and the Tradition of Progress.” RIBA Publications, p. 129.

² Ibid. p. 548.

³ The *Cranbrook Estate* series can be viewed at: http://www.stevendaynyc.com/frame_cranbrook02.htm

⁴ Berthold Lubetkin (May 1932) “Architectural Thought Since the Revolution,” *The Architectural Review*, LXXI, p. 201.

⁵ John Allan (2002) *Berthold Lubetkin*. London: Merrell.

⁶ Working within a dialectical framework, he employed the juxtapositions of “the grid and the arabesque, the logical and the lyrical, the austere and the sensuous, the orthogonal and the curvilinear”—as metaphors that can be superimposed on the more general dualisms of “reason and emotion, mind and matter, necessity and chance.” Ibid. p. 138.

⁷ Berthold Lubetkin (1975) “A Commentary on Western Architecture,” Open University broadcast, A305, 27/28, Side 1. Cited in John Allan (1992) “Bertold Lubetkin: Architecture and the Tradition of Progress.” RIBA Publications.

⁸ Martin Heidegger (1971 [1935]) “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, p. 146.

⁹ Martin Heidegger (1971 [1951]) “...Poetically Man Dwells...,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, p. 215.

¹⁰ That contemporary social morphology does not neatly overlay the building typology of modernist architecture does not necessarily mean ‘failure’ (as has been decided by critics including the Prince of Wales with his distaste for “scientifically conceived slabs” in favor of “a city without towers” characterized by “soft” architecture and ornament). See: <https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/media/speeches>, for the Prince of Wales’s speeches on architecture.

¹¹ Sketch and caption from: John Allan (1992) “Bertold Lubetkin: Architecture and the Tradition of Progress.” RIBA Publications, p. 549.

¹² Beatrice Jaguaribe (1999) “Modernist Ruins: National Narratives and Architectural Forms,” *Public Culture* 11(1): 295-312.

¹³ Day’s education and background combine architecture, engineering, photography, and later, painting. He briefly worked for a small architectural practice in Germany after finishing his engineering studies in California, but then turned his full efforts to art. He received his MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute, experimenting with painting and casting on wooden panels with various materials such as paraffin, encaustic, and cement. When he moved to New York, in the late 1990s, he began working in photography again. When asked about his background, Day describes the development of his interests and practice as both formal and coincidental: “Growing up, I’d hoped to become an architect—having studied drafting and later mechanical engineering. I started working in photography as an undergraduate student, as a release from my engineering studies in California and then in Berlin. Later, when I became more focused on art, it became a means of documenting ideas for painting.”

¹⁴ All of these projects can be seen at the artist website mentioned above.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin describes his method as follows: “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.” Benjamin (2003 [1939]) *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, p. 460.