

Beetham Beetham Beetham: Banal Luxury and ‘Quality Places’

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The UK has seen the longest period of boom in the construction industry since WW2, with continuous growth between 1993 and 2007, a context that dramatically and radically changed following the global financial crisis of 2008-09. The boom was characterised by a revived focus on the city centre as a space where regeneration of post-industrial cities could be catalysed in an environment that saw overt competition between cities to be the best. The boom also coincided with the raising in public consciousness of design as a qualitative and desirable commodity through exposure in popular media and encapsulation of ‘quality’ in political and policy objectives. This in turn has led to the introduction of new areas of built environment focussed policy and guidance aiming to ensure design ‘quality’ that embodies the values of ‘place’ in both urban space and built form. Place intersects the uniqueness of location with culture. This raises the question ‘If each city is different why are new places all so similar?’

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Introduction: The banality of ubiquitous luxury.

Luxury depends on qualitative difference to establish desire. The consumer led model of contemporary society offers a socially accessible version of this condition, where luxury is presented at all levels of income. This paper will explore the architectural and urban resultant of this approach through comparative analysis of this market driven context. The visible symbols of the boom are new forms of housing that encapsulated the values of society that created them, the users of which engage with the city through new forms of public and pseudo public urban space. The paper will focus on schemes built by The Beetham Organisation, a highly visible property development company that surfed the crest of the noughties property boom, as built symbols that effectively concretised the demand for luxury city centre living and its iteration in British cities. The super-highrise apartment was recapitulated as an object of desire, a Neo-modern icon that defined prosperity and progress, in stark contrast to its previous iteration as the embodiment of low income mass housing.

In parallel to this creation of architectural objects a remarkable homogenisation of collective taste is evident at all scales. Urban space mirrors interior space as its architecture adopts a readily consumable, ideologically value free, but heavily commodified version of Modernism. These new spaces rely on balancing lifestyle individuality and corporate identity, reflected in the architectural form of new building's exteriors and the development and refinement of new forms of aesthetically commodified urban space, leveraged as a developer delivered by-product of lifestyle lead urban living.

The housing market during the boom appeared to be an infallible money making machine. The dream that was sold to the public saw housing move away from its original function as dwelling space, repositioned instead as an investment opportunity that consumers could live in, buy to let became buy to leave, where investors (often overseas) never occupied the space they owned. Lifestyle and profit facilitated by space and design, this apparently win-win situation produced stylised spatial configurations that mapped directly onto the lifestyle choices of the urbane inhabitant of this new space. The important factor in its success is neutrality of the built outcomes and their superficial relationship with anything that may be described as an ideological position. By establishing a language of form and space based on Modernism but embodying none of the values of Modernism it is possible to produce urban space that no longer holds meaning. This ideological neutral backdrop responds directly to the market, able to adopt any shape or form.

The building boom resulted in a recapitulation and repositioning of previously marginalised building types as culturally acceptable forms. The language of Modernity and its built outcomes were recast as desirable luxuries rather than imposed necessities. This process necessitated commodification. Buildings (and spaces) that had previously been derided as *old new* (bad) became *new old* (good). The categorisation of carefully selected examples of building as Mid-century Modern represents an act of curation of the built stock of cities throughout Britain. This re-valuing allowed the exclusion of the majority of the Modernist historical legacy, whilst certain significant works, the most prominent of which are iconic structures including Park Hill in Sheffield and Trellick Tower in West London were included.

From Pioneer to Mainstream

The building boom can be grouped into distinct phases that have specific character. The first phase was pioneering, reusing existing built stock, in the case of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham typically former industrial and warehouse space, with the ‘loft’ as the model (Fig 1.). This phase was followed by the new build ‘loft’, in buildings that initially adopted the warehouse aesthetic but later developed their own specific form, in Manchester the apartment ‘wedge’ e.g. No. 1 Deansgate by Ian Simpson Architects (Fig 2) defines the built form of the second phase. This second phase marks the entry of large volume house builders into the market and coincided and fed the later stages of the housing price boom in the UK. Rising land values rendered the ‘wedge’ as uneconomical. At this point (c.2004) the tower (Fig 3) emerges as the preferred form. There is also a shift away from the post industrial aesthetic and terminology, the ‘loft’ is replaced by the ‘apartment’.



Fig 1. Loft: Smithfield Buildings, Manchester: Stephenson Bell Architects Urban Splash developers 1998

Fig 2. Apartment: No.1 Deansgate, Manchester: Ian Simpson Architects Crosby Homes developers 2002

Fig 3. Super-highrise Apartment: Beetham Tower, Manchester: Ian Simpson Architects Beethm Organisation developers 2006

The agenda of inner city regeneration resulted in self-similar (yet uncoordinated) built form being delivered throughout British city centres. The re-emergence of Modernist language as an acceptable form of architectural production within certain identifiable cultural constraints and contextualised by a new traditionalism is an important feature of the built result of the boom. The interrelationship between Neo—modernist luxury loft apartment and privatised urban pseudo public meeting place was set up, as city authorities demanded developers to give back (under section 106 of the Planning Policy Guidance) to the city, in exchange for being granted permits to build.

We are now experiencing the legacy of this strategy, which focussed on leveraging the market to produce value through inner city regeneration based around a desire by planning authorities and politician to make British cities more European, delivered by the market. The resultant financially driven building types and spaces, sanctioned by planning authorities as part of their strategic mission, forms the basis of this case study based critique. Built and almost built exemplars in the major UK regional centres of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham articulate the meaning of ‘quality’ as a deliverable objective, achieved through the production of ‘luxury’ space, founded on a mixture of financial, architectural and urban speculation where the drawing, description and preconception of a scheme was often more important than the finished results. Fantasy beats and sometime parallels reality. The paper explores the concept of consumed space where use destroys value and looks at the idea of legacy, both finished and unfinished.

The move from culturally unacceptable politically and ideologically based Modernism, to superficially aesthetically similar yet acceptable Neo-modernism, is a subtext of this analysis, revealing how the culture of an era informs the production of architectural form and urban space. This exposes the tension that exists between the desire to make places and the drivers of globalism. The value of place as defined by its icons is a key feature of this new (peculiarly) heritage responsive context, throwing up unexpected and bizarre results, driven by the desire to produce statement buildings and quality places.

Function as a Driver

The basis for functionally defined built form and urban planning models is the idea that function is a valid means of defining use. This paradigm starts to collapse when the market distorts the functional rationale for the production of space. Functional utility has to map onto actual use or the underlying model breaks down, raising the question when does a dwelling space become a dwelling *style* space, when does an urban space

become an urban *style* space? At its most extreme when does a city become an urban style settlement experience? The extreme market conditions of the boom saw utility replaced by style.

The legacy of urban strategies that rely on the idea of continuous growth appears questionable in the new climate of austerity and sustainability. Luxury depends on exclusivity. When anything becomes ubiquitous it is no longer perceived as a luxury, becoming either a right, or banal, or a problem. The inner city loft market has rapidly moved through the cycle of luxury to ubiquity, what is the legacy that this has left British cities?

Making Place

Difference between British industrial cities historically derived from their functional specialisms. Liverpool's docks, Manchester's textile mills and Birmingham's engineering. These sectors have seen radical reduction in their size and importance since the 1960's. Moving into a post industrially defined era cities are faced with the hard question of how to define themselves as offering a specific and visible advantage to attract investment and income. The built form described in this paper is a direct result of this strategy, based on the representation of the abundant form of production in the UK between 1992-2007, namely the growth in consumer credit and the housing market. The direct link between the act of making things in a certain place is changed to the representation of an idea of place through spectacular gesture.

Urban Living

The re-definition of urban living as a desirable lifestyle choice was initiated in the early 1990's by pioneering developers including Urban Splash, who promoted the idea of the urban loft as a cool alternative to suburbia. By branding the urban experience through a clear design identity that embraced the language of Modernity, often in conjunction with reused industrial building stock, a new market was established, based on the idea that living in urban centres was both desirable and marketable. The growth in demand for city centre building stock for conversion into apartments soon exhausted existing stock and the new build urban apartment emerged to fill the gap. This was embraced by planning authorities as a means of bring life back into the British city centre taking a 'European' model as the precedent. The scale and ambition of these schemes rapidly increased over the decade between 1997-2007, to the point where speculatively developed housing could produce the tallest residential building in Europe (Beetham Tower, Manchester) (Fig 3). This embodied the idea of luxury and high design as the means of regenerating the city, complete with a 5* hotel and a penthouse flat with an imported grove of genuine Italian olive trees.



Fig 4: Beetham in Birmingham (2005, 39 Floors), Manchester (2006, 50 Floors) and Liverpool (2004, 29 Floors)

Beetham Tower, Birmingham (also referred to as the Holloway Circus Tower or 10 Holloway Circus) is a 121.5-metre (399 ft) tall mixed-use skyscraper in Birmingham city centre. It is named after the developers the Beetham Organisation and was designed by Ian Simpson, built by Laing O'Rourke. When it was completed in 2006, it was estimated to have cost around £72 million to construct. The entire development covers an area of 650 square metres (7,000 sq ft).

Completed in 2006 at a cost of £150 million, the Beetham Tower in Manchester, is the highest building in Manchester, the tallest residential building in Europe and the 7th tallest building in England with over 525,000 square feet of space. The Beetham Tower is 168.87 metres high, has a total of 47 floors and is home to the Hilton Hotel, 219 luxury apartments and 16 penthouses.

Beetham Tower, Liverpool is a residential tower in Liverpool city centre. Developed by the Beetham Organisation and built by Carrillion it was completed in early 2004. It is 90 metres (295 ft) tall and has 29 floors.

British cities (outside London) vied to build versions of this new speculative paradise, the residential tower becoming the embodiment of the successfully regenerated inner city. Importantly the visual language of the tower was the critical element of displaying success, through the architectural representation of newness. Interestingly high rise living, routinely vilified in the British press from the 1970's-1990's, was not problematic and it is now possible to see new (good) residential towers constructed adjacent to old (bad) towers in many British cities. The question of how long the new will remain 'good' is live. The stripping of the language of modernity from any connections with social provision has been critical in these developments, and it has even been possible to reposition previously tainted social housing stock with the values of the new boom by clearing and refacing Modernist icons of the past (Denys Lasdun's Keeling

House in Hackney being the key example of this). This represented the market driving home the logical conclusion of Thatcherite housing policy, initiated in the 1980's.

Lifestyle does not demand function to succeed. The representation of *lifestyle* was crucial to the boom and the built outcome of this was housing style development that pushed liveability to its limits. When a house is sold to someone who will never live in it, it becomes a purely speculative object. The possibility of occupation is relatively unimportant at times of rapid market growth. Schemes existed as speculative tools even before they were started on site. Buying off plan against an image became a key sector of the developers market. This produces a source of cash to leverage the value of the site, offers the speculator the possibility of buying at a discount to maximise potential profit. Critically, the representation of the scheme becomes as important as the scheme itself, a kind of spectral presence on the site.

When schemes were completed the rapid influx of new stock created a market dissimilar to the wider housing market. Newly built space that has been lived in became used, and therefore decreased in value. An empty flat becomes more valuable than an occupied flat in this market, therefore the functional performance of the flat as a space to live in becomes secondary. The smallest micro-flats (approx 37m²) were unable to sustain anything other than temporary occupation and embody the ideal space to sell lifestyle. Equipment replaces architecture with implied lifestyle represented through the plasma television, the (never used) cooker and the bathroom taps overtaking the domestic function as the dominant aspect of the schemes.

The objective of city centre regeneration was to repopulate the city, taking the 'European' city as the model. The city centre was defined as a space of cultural consumption, and the lifestyle that this implied was initially limited to single professionals. The infrastructure that is needed to support families living in the city centre simply did not exist. The target demographic produced a striking degree of homogeneity in the built outcome of this strategy as demonstrated by Fig 4 showing the internal space of apartments in three different locations matched with the facades of the buildings to which they belong.



Fig 5: Luxury public space on operation: bullring Birmingham (formerly The Bullring), Arndale Centre Manchester (formerly Cannon Street), Liverpool ONE (formerly

Designer Shopping

The designer apartment is a microcosm of the city's ambition to become spaces of luxury consumption. They are mirrored by the correlating space to this mass consumer urbanism, the shopping centre (Fig 5). The homogenisation and privatisation of the urban centre was predicted by theorists such as Davies (1990) and Koolhaas (1993). Urban space driven by consumption requires points of production for goods. The shopping centre replaces the factory as the focus of the city. The increasing sophistication of retail has resulted in the formation of the largest built forms in the city centre, where retail dominates. In all the studies featured in this paper space that was formerly controlled by the city authorities has been privatized and embodied within giant malls. The oldest example here, Manchester's Arndale Centre, originally occupied eight city blocks, with a major road, Cannon Street cutting through the building. Following the 1996 IRA bomb the Arndale was extensively remodeled and the former public realm of Cannon Street embodied within the building. The same process has happened in Birmingham's bullring, and Liverpool's Liverpool ONE. By ceding urban space the city removes cost as an 'improvement'.

Austerity and Lifestyle

This paper has discussed the outcomes of an urban regeneration strategy based on using the market to deliver and meet the objectives of bringing a European lifestyle to British city centres. The results demonstrate that the market will distort policy objectives into a post functional reality. The dependence on consumption as the key driver leaves a built legacy that is inflexible and empty of cultural meaning. The previous condition of spatial super abundance that was created by the collapse of these city's industrial base is in the process of being recreated through a surplus of functionally unviable domestic space and empty retail and office space.

Is the natural condition of post industrial or post retail cities always one of spatial super abundance and does this situation automatically set up the pre conditions for the next form of spatial over production. If functional use squeezes out ambiguity and the possibility of cultural re-appropriation, perhaps it is time to move towards post functional planning as an objective?

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