



**martin
dodge**

**fort
beswick**

**been,
gone
and
forgotten**

**terraced
homes
and
sixties
slum
clearances,
to
the
construction
of
a
'streets-in-the-sky'
mega-block
estate
and
then
back
to
two
storey
brick
houses**

the spatial and fiscal challenges of adequately housing an expanding population have been at the heart of the story of manchester and they remain significant today. starting from the city's rapid industrialisation in the late 1700s and through its physical growth into a commercial metropolis with global connection during the nineteenth century, manchester had severe housing problems. in response the city has seen all manner of different residential forms: dense terraces and back-to-back houses in places like hulme, gated residential communities like victoria park for the elites, purpose built municipal tenement blocks like victoria square for labourers, planned garden suburbs such as chorltonville for aspiring middle class professionals, the building of separate garden city out at wythenshawe, to modernist inspired blocks of flats in the interwar years such as heywood house in ardwick and after the second world war the development of various overspill housing estates, such as hattersley, that shipped residents well beyond the municipal borders. here i consider what happened in the 1960s and 70s when new architectural forms and construction techniques were employed to assemble social housing cheaply and quickly. the results were distinctive – and controversial – mega block estates.

the 1960s and wholesale urban renewal

manchester still had large areas of housing deemed inadequate in terms of sanitation and overcrowding into the 1960s. many inner city neighbourhoods had little or no open space and poor community facilities. an ambitious approach was enacted to tackle the legacy of victorian urbanisation involving principles of comprehensive urban renewal as opposed to piecemeal clearances and small-scale rebuilding that had marked earlier attempts to provide better housing.

town hall planners looked to clear away many hundred streets of victorian and edwardian terraces – typically categorised as 'slums' and condemned by redlining on maps – to create many thousands of new dwellings quickly using industrialised systems building techniques. several large 'streets-in-the-sky' estates, comprising six- to ten-storey multi-block structures were realised. some of the most visually impressive were the hulme phase v development (the 'crescents'), the large multi-level 'lego-brick' looking estates in harpurhey (the turkey lane estate), and the scheme in longsight (gibson street area, which became known as 'fort ardwick') and, as we shall examine in detail below, one in beswick (wellington street scheme, nicknamed as 'fort beswick').

their design was seen as contemporary and socially progressive, with good living space, light and sanitation; and it was anticipated "that industrialized building can come into its own and produce the continuity of building fabric which it is suggested will provide the best solution for the environmental problems to be met in urban renewal."¹

the systems building approaches were being promoted nationally as the most efficient solutions for urban renewal and mass social housing. it was believed they could deliver new homes at speed and volume, whilst also driving down unit costs. there was also undoubtedly enthusiasm for this approach from younger architect-planners appointed in the 1960s to the housing department of manchester council. these new approaches were heavily marketed as well by several competing large construction firms looking to deploy their own proprietary industrialised system of building to win profitable local authority contracts.

planning a system-built housing estate — wellington street scheme

beswick, a small inner neighbourhood of east manchester, was developed during the first half of the twentieth century primarily as a crowded residential area for the mass ranks of workers employed in adjacent factories and heavy engineering plants of bradford, gorton and miles plating. it was densely populated with herring-bone lines of edwardian era terraces and little open space; a familiar pattern of urban residential development repeated across many of britain's industrial cities.

the wellington street residential area in the middle of beswick bordered by ashton old road and grey mare lane was slated for comprehensive renewal in the mid-60s. this erased the established land-use and street grid. following surveys by inspectors from the medical officer of health and planning department, virtually all of the existing terraced housing was condemned as unfit for human habitation and subject to compulsory purchase orders. a total of 34 acres was cleared by 1967, with the demolition of over 1,200 houses plus more than a hundred shops and ten pubs.²

the scale of the clearance area provided the blank slate deemed necessary for deploying systems building techniques in an efficient manner. rows of small two-up, two-down brick dwellings were replaced by monolithic multi-storey blocks of flats constructed of rendered concrete panels. this represented an order magnitude change in the physical scale of housing in the area. when completed the variable heights of this mega-block structure with its walkways and decks had somewhat of a castellated appearance and quickly it was detrimentally labelled as 'fort beswick'.

1 stones r c, 1967, "housing and redevelopment: the realization of urban planning theory in a renewal context", town planning review, 37(4), p247.

2 "city council to clear 1,060 houses", guardian, 5 january 1965, p4. dewhurst e, 1968, "still 30,000 slums to be cleared", guardian, 29 january, p6.

building fort beswick

in the systems building approach employed for the wellington street scheme all structural elements were produced out of concrete and manufactured en-mass in centralised factories before being shipped to the site where the construction process was simply a matter of assembling standard parts in sequence, with wall panels slotting together and bolting into floors.

this could be done using movable cranes rather than expensive scaffolding. the building site itself was said to be 'dry', i.e. without need for wet concrete, mortar and plaster. on a large, open site the result was a continuous assembly line construction, which advocates argued was much cheaper than conventional building methods primary by reduction in the need for costly craft skills. eliminating bricklayers, plasterers and the like was seen as key virtue of factory-based concrete prefabrication.

however, the quality of the manufacture of panel components and the precision of their assemblage on site were crucial to produce robust and weatherproof structures. poor quality control and careless work on site were the root cause of most of the subsequent physical problems on systems built housing estates from this era across britain.

the wellington street estate was delivered using a proprietary industrialised building system known as the bison wall frame, developed in the early 1960s by concrete ltd, using panel construction method originated in scandinavia.³

the contract for construction was £4.4 million to build over 1,000 dwellings, along with fourteen shops and eight laundries.⁴ the estate was made up of 34 large multi-storey rectangular blocks, and laid out at right angles to form squares and spurs. the blocks were of different lengths and heights: there were eight four-storey, thirteen six-storey, and thirteen eight-storey blocks. construction was completed by 1972.

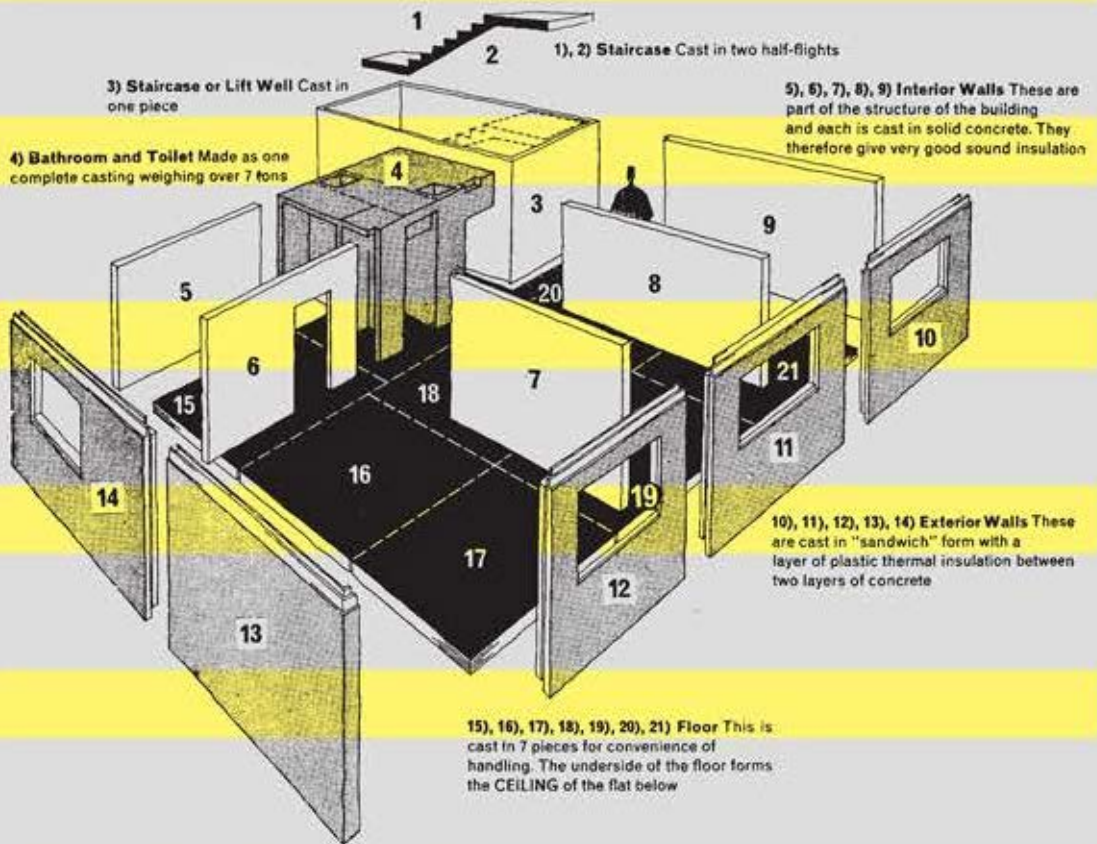
in aesthetic terms the muted brown palette and rough texture of the exterior surfaces of the blocks was a point of contention. critics asserted that it meant fort beswick 'looked like shit', in contrast the architects in the housing department claimed the finish was in fact a pleasant buff colour designed to offset the greyness of bare concrete.⁵ in reality the visual appearance of the estate derived largely from cost savings in the design because "painting and rendering required maintenance [whereas] aggregate facing formed a permanent and (due to its irregular relief) self-cleaning finish".⁶

3 it was the most successful large panel system deployed in country with upwards of 32,000 housing units built using it from 1964 and 1978 (finlmore b, 1989, houses from the factory: system building and the welfare state, 1942-74 (rivers oram press), p173).

4 the same company had already been awarded the contract for the gibson street housing estate ('fort arwick') using the same bison wall frame system.

5 stones, 1967.

6 finlmore, 1989, p28.



1 Construction of the standard two-bedroom dwelling.

- (a) Ducts for plumbing are provided for within the structure.
- (b) Ducts for electric wiring are provided for in the floor and interior wall units. Electric underfloor heating can be laid in the concrete.
- (c) All interior surfaces have a very smooth finish and walls and ceilings are ready for decoration with paint or paper, without further preparation.
- (d) Exterior walls have the decorative finish cast into the outer layer of the 'sandwich' during manufacture.
- (e) Window frames are cast into the outer walls during manufacture. These wall units may even be delivered to the site completely glazed.
- (f) External joints of special design prevent penetration by rain or damp between the exterior wall panels.

living in fort beswick

the complex configuration of the new estate with many dead-end roads and lots of pedestrianised alleys and courts made for a landscape with little immediate legibility, while the verticality of the space with various lifts, staircases and multi-level landings, coupled with linking upper level walkways made the estate even harder to comprehend.

yet the walkways and decks were a significant architectural element in fort beswick, as they were in most other late-1960s mega-block estates, and were optimistically conceived as 'streets-in-the-sky' with "pedestrian routes should be allowed to 'meander'".⁷

residents living on different blocks were able to traverse nearly the whole estate on these upper level walkways, including access to the shopping centre, without having to go down to the ground. however, many tenants found that lots of the upper landings and walkways lacked sufficient pedestrian traffic to create natural surveillance and a sense of safety that is felt on busy city streets. the decks failed to function as real streets with a social purpose; instead they became a source of anxiety around anti-social behaviour and fear of being mugged. the multi-level nature of the wellington street estate, like many similar ones, became more problematic because of inadequate maintenance of vital passenger lifts; their failure had serious implications for access for many hundreds of people living on higher floors.

within a short time from the completion and the full occupation of the wellington street estate issues with the bison designed blocks began to emerge.

initial tenant dissatisfaction with the quality of the buildings and the provision of communal facilities quickly developed into serious disquiet over their physical safety and sense of security of the estate as a place to live. structural failings interacted with social breakdown to make wellington street into a 'problematic' inner-city estate by the end of the 1970s.

a key issue with the basic structural integrity of the bison wall frame construction system was articulated by mp peter pike in a parliamentary debate: "... there have been major problems with condensation, dampness and panels falling down. if i were a tenant in those properties, i should be afraid to walk near them in case a large concrete block fell on my head."⁸ in numerous places the seals around panels joints and windows were inadequate to prevent water penetration. reliability issues and the cost of electric heating compounded the serious damp problems inside many dwellings.

the sheer scale of the blocks and their identikit, monochrome architecture fed into an oppressive sense of anonymity and the layout over multiple levels in many ways discouraged social interaction and community spirit. the lack of care and routine maintenance of the public spaces, resulting from a combination of tenant alienation and budgetary cuts in the local authority, contributed to the overall poor environmental quality of the estate and worked to encourage further anti-social behaviour.

the reputation of fort beswick, along with many other systems-built deck-access housing structures in manchester, including the turkey lane estate in harphurhey and the hulme v 'crescents', became notorious to many residents and outside observers.

projecting a wholly negative picture of such 1960s mega-block housing schemes does, however, risks falling into dystopian stereotypes. the lived experience in the wellington street blocks was likely more complex – there were certainly countervailing voices from some residents about positive aspects of life. there are other perspectives on the relative merits of the architectural design of fort beswick and fellow 'streets-in-the-sky' estates, and of the actual industrial systems building approaches.

some of the reasons for the rapid failure of wellington street as a housing scheme were not the fault of architecture of the estate itself and were caused by external factors. importantly ineffectual management and letting practice by housing officials contributed to early social problems and then tended to exacerbate them. stable families were moved out and as the deck-access flats became harder to rent to working people, they became a social 'dumping ground' for those without other housing options.

there were often also the most vulnerable tenants and people with other physical and mental health problems. one also needs to contextualise the social challenges faced in fort beswick in terms of the wider socio-economic changes that afflicted urban britain in the 1970s and 1980s and especially so in the inner cities of major northern conurbations. deindustrialisation eliminated many of the sources of steady blue-collar employment for social housing tenants, and long-term male unemployment became the norm. prevalent joblessness, multiple deprivation, coupled with widespread morbidity and endemic drug problems, all tended to be concentrated on inner city estates like fort beswick.

fort beswick going ... going ... gone

by the early 1980s growing concerns were being expressed nationally about both the social and material failings the systems-built estates across british cities. in manchester pressure from organised tenants groups and local housing campaigners, stimulated by coverage in local newspapers and in the national media, forced the council into serious consideration about the future of fort beswick and the other large 1960s deck-access estates.

in autumn 1981, following a detailed external structural survey of the estate, the city council decided to demolish fort beswick rather than try to take expensive remedial action on the original bison blocks. the times newspaper reported the cost of building 300 new homes on the site would be £4m and architecturally they "would not differ much in style from the old victorian terraces that were razed to make way for the concrete jungle."⁹

a phased multi-year demolition of fort beswick commenced in november 1982 with a more conventional street grid being reinstated. the replacement residential development was aptly described by journalist padraig colman: "i visited manchester eight years ago and the area once covered by fort beswick had neat little rows of houses all on ground level. although there was more space and the houses looked in good condition, they did rather remind me of the old terraced houses that were demolished in the 1960s."¹⁰

7 "manchester's new ideals for modern living", guardian, 16 october 1967, p14.

8 parliamentary debate on 'system-built houses', hunsford, 12 march 1984.

9 witherow, j, 1981 "where demolition will come as a relief", the times, 11 november, p2.

fort beswick — being forgotten

the mega blocks of fort beswick existed for less than twenty years and there is no physical evidence to be seen of them now. like the other examples in manchester all that is left are the fading memories of former residents, plus scant photographic material. the neighbourhoods have been bulldozed flat yet again and completely rebuilt. their problematic reputation does still reverberate down the years in the public discourse around tackling current social housing challenges.

while there were many good intentions within the municipal paternalism that drove forward these urban renewal projects in the 1960s, there was also little or no consultation with local communities being rehoused. there were class divisions between decision-makers involved in mapping slum clearances areas and the people living in the terraced streets being redlined. few, if any, of the town hall officials lived in areas they were responsible for rehousing.

a small but powerful illustration of this disconnection comes through in the use of children's building bricks to model the layout and massing of the estates in official publications. at one level the use lego was probably just an expedient choice by time-pressured staff in manchester housing department, but viewed critically and with hindsight these models seem to encapsulate the technocratic thinking of the 1960s.

10 blog posting, 23 august 2014, <https://pciceman.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/corruption-and-construction/>

11 bendixon t, 1969, "man-sized lego", guardian, 17 november, p. 6.

12 a phrase seemingly coined by manchester city councillor joseph dean, quoted in morris m, 1971, "city council member ejected", guardian, 6 may, p22.

lego brick mentalities of fort beswick were about maximising the use of space, minimising cost and mechanically stacking boxes together with little thought for how the result would feel for real people.¹¹

in many of the efforts at clean-sweep urban renewal and rehousing in the 1960s, some of the poorest people in society were effectively being used as guinea pigs for architectural experimentation, testing out industrially manufactured homes. it is easy to see the resulting architecture and urban design as dehumanising in their scale and uniformity. a lot was also poorly built, due often to cutting corners on budgets and dodgy contractors.

disappointingly then the experiments like fort beswick in high-density modernist housing, while delivering materially better sanitation and more open space at ground level, did not produce healthy places or stable residential communities. it can be plausibly argued that they ended-up recreating slum-like conditions in concrete blocks form; demonised by some as 'elevated ghettos'.¹² certainly many residents of these 'street-in-the-sky' mega blocks felt they were worse than the rows of small terraced housing they had replaced. it is now impossible to properly judge as both the edwardian terraces and fort beswick are gone.