Housing Hierarchies: As-Built Portraits of London’s East End

Anna Cooke

University of East London

Presentation Method. I would like to:

i. present in person (with a written paper)

Abstract (300 words):

London’s East End is a miscellany of housing projects in the true sense of that phrase; proposals for the housing of a population made from a distance. It is, to use Colin Ward’s expression, a museum of housing. Relics of a chaotic but autonomous past sit next to the more or less generous housing provision devised by various authorities. Experiments in form and density have other undertones; subtle, social, political.

“It is all there, every mean or patronising or sentimental or brutal or humane assumption about the housing needs of the urban working class” (1).

From the early efforts of philanthropic companies to various later government agencies, the ‘problem’ of housing has been addressed through analysis of minimum standards and spatial layouts. Even where these efforts are relatively successful, they remain the result of depersonalised planning policies, of hierarchies in property ownership, urban
planning and management. The potential for tenants, householders, to take the initiative and force a resolution of the housing problem is simply not countenanced.

This paper proposes that the architecture of the East End is an illustration of built hierarchies and that it can be read as a social text; a record of changing, and unchanging, social and political structures. It is based on two linked methodologies; the first is a walking and writing practice that results in a series of portraits, thick descriptions, of particular housing projects; the second is the construction of an academic narrative, prompted by a reaction to the first. To use Rykwert’s ‘socially committed’ method, the buildings, objects, are treated ‘as evidence of how they were made in their context’ (2). Two parallel investigations are presented: a direct engagement with the built (tangible) heritage of the East End and a review of the (intangible) policies and political strategies that produced the built examples.


• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Anna Cooke studied architecture at University College Dublin and Kunstakademietes Arkitektskole, Copenhagen. She graduated with distinction from the MA Architectural History, Theory and Interpretation programme at The Cass, London Metropolitan University where she won academic and creative writing prizes. She lectures in History and Theory of Architecture at University of East London and at The Cass and is interested in the intersection between writing and practicing architecture. Since 2011, she has worked at Caruso St John Architects in London. Her portfolio in practice includes a number of major cultural projects such as Tate Britain, Liverpool Philharmonic Hall and Stockholm City Library, all of which deal with questions of cultural and architectural heritage in a direct way. Her research interests include walking as architectural method, communal living, and the use of literary narrative as a design tool. Current research is focussed on a comparative study of dweller participation in the housing process across Europe.