‘Don’t blame the buildings!’ An analysis of the cultural significance of London’s post-war housing estates and the misperceptions of their poor design.

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Present in person (with/without a written paper)

Housing estates built by local authorities in the period of extensive reconstruction following WWII have been maligned by both architecture critics and the general public. Many of the social problems associated with post-war housing estates have been wrongly blamed on the poor design of the buildings themselves and the notion that their architects were out of touch with the needs of ordinary residents, without consideration of the impact of poor maintenance and management. Many estates have come to be seen as places that breed crime and social isolation, and their residents have also often been demonised.
Consequently, when it comes to deciding which post-war housing developments should become listed buildings to preserve them for future generations, public opinion is often completely at odds with the ‘expert’ view. Additionally, many post-war buildings are comparatively young when it comes to assessing their heritage significance on ‘age value’, so suddenly the bar for getting one of these buildings listed becomes very high. Despite the national programme of listing post-war architecture in the 1990s, post-war estates are still under-represented on the statutory list. In London, in the face of increasing development pressure, many estates are under threat of demolition.

After identifying the different heritage values represented in London’s estates, this presentation contrasts key case studies in Camden and Lambeth, the significance of the former’s estates having been widely recognised through statutory listing and conservation area designation as opposed to the distinct lack of listed estates in the latter. These case studies are discussed with reference to recent controversies such as the decision to refuse Robin Hood Gardens for listing (ultimately resulting in its demolition) and a discussion ensues of whether or not the fabric-focused listing system is effective in preserving social heritage associated with post-war estates.

- **Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**

Tim Horne is a postgraduate student at Kingston University approaching the end of an MSc in Historic Building Conservation. After graduating from the University of Southampton (BA History) and the University of Bristol (MA History) he has worked for Historic England for the last 6 years in a variety of roles, most recently in the London Planning team where he supports a range of specialists advising on London’s historic environment and manages a portfolio of grant projects to return Heritage At Risk buildings and places to sustainable use. His Research Project for his current MSc assesses the heritage significance of low-rise, high density post-war social housing and whether or not the current processes of statutory listing and conservation area designation are effective means of preserving the significance of these buildings. Through examination of a number of case studies in London, the project considers whether listing in its current form is a suitable form of protection for distinctly Modern architecture.