

Finding Space to Breathe by Jonathan P. Watts

Often it's the paraphernalia of architecture that is collected and displayed in museum galleries: fragments, models, drawings, and correspondence. Complete buildings, where extant, are typically beyond the museum's walls. Disparately sited, if not museums themselves, they are lived in. Living architecture is open to the contingencies and negotiations of dwelling. The museum gallery – ritualistic, preservationist, elevating sight above other senses – is a device for focussing contemplative attention. How do we find a space in between?

Writing in 1936, the cultural critic Walter Benjamin contrasted the disciplines of art and architecture in his prophetic essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' to think through the way cinema as a mass modern art refashioned audience participation between the poles of distraction and concentration. A person before a work of art, Benjamin wrote, is said to be absorbed by it; in contrast, the distracted masses absorbs the work of art. Cinema, symptomatic of a mass transformation of perception in modernity, with its array of shocking and beguiling techniques, meets its audience in a state of distraction.

This apparatus of distraction, however, was nothing new. Before the great formal innovations of tragedy, before the epic poem, before even panel painting of the Middle Ages, primeval architecture, according to Benjamin, 'always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction'¹. It is prototype because, as he writes, the human need for shelter is ever enduring. Experienced by sight and touch, architecture can be an object of contemplation but is more likely to be noticed only incidentally. Touch is an embodied sense guided by habitual use. Forceful changes of perception occur, Benjamin suggests, not by contemplation alone, but by habitual, and therefore distracted, often unconscious, encounters.

It's a suggestive idea – no more than a paragraph in Benjamin's essay – that EDRM architecture returned to in the early developmental stages of their 'Space to Breathe' project. Located on marginal land in rural Suffolk, a former poultry farm owned by the same family since 1959, the site at the southern edge of the village of Ixworth will host plots of land for renters to self-build simple, low impact architect-designed cabins alongside gardens and allotments for leisure and holiday in a region where the property market is overheated with second homeowners. This collection of small architectural wonders – the architectural equivalent of an art gallery, as EDRM envisions it – will adhere to a curatorial panel and design guide to ensure standards.

It's unusual to encounter an heterogeneous collection of designed buildings. The modern archetype must be the twenty-nine small buildings of the Venice Giardini on the eastern edge of the island. Sited on a former marshland reclaimed by Napoleon's engineers, in 1907, Léon Sneyers' Belgian pavilion joined the Central Pavilion as the first of many architectural exemplars of the time with the explicit function of hosting exhibitions. More prosaically, Weald and Dowland in West Sussex is a 'living museum' of historic vernacular buildings. Near Basel, the Vitra Design Campus consists of a collection of twenty-four buildings by leading contemporary architects, including Tadao Ando, SANAA, and Nicholas Grimshaw. And while Bernard Tschumi's celebrated Parc de la Villette in the 19th arrondissement of Paris assembles a collection of steel follies accenting a master plan, none of these are dwellings. Indeed, the folly of assembling an architectural collection reached a kind of terminus in the Ordos100 project initiated in 2008 in the steppes of Inner Mongolia, China, where one hundred practices from around the world, invited by the artist Ai Weiwei, working with Herzog & de Meuron, designed villas as the first phase of a \$3.2m cultural park.

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, Pimlico, 1991, p.232.

Any collection of architecture is an expression of wealth, power, and resources. Ordos100 was never completed: unfinished ruins deteriorate in the Gobi Desert. And Venice, of course, is sinking. What would it require, beyond mere spectacle, to produce a sustainable and innovative collection of buildings – a collection of buildings for contemplation and living that express the shared values of an intentional community? Space to Breathe is the prototype of a model that could be implemented on similar neglected and marginal land.

All along Suffolk's 'heritage coast' the price of property in quaint towns and villages has been bloated by second home ownership and holiday buy to lets. Notoriously, in 2018 a Southwold beach hut was listed on the market at £150,000 – £90,000 would get you a flat in Ipswich. Further south along the coast in Aldeburgh the overall average house price has increased 16% in the last year alone, according to HM Land Registry. Here, the average price of a terrace property is £601,857. This is above even the national average of a 14.2% rise in the cost of rural housing this year – twice the rate of homes in cities – impacted by a quixotic mix of post-Brexit residence policy, stamp duty holidays, staycations, and the changing nature of work urged by the Covid-19 crisis.² Successive lockdowns has enabled households to save three times as much money as the year before: property in the UK is understood as an asset opportunity.

On the coast, and in scenic areas inland, buying a first home in rural locations has become impossible. And the result, as George Monbiot recently wrote, is 'community death'. 'How big would our housing crisis be,' Monbiot asks, 'if it were not for second homes?' 'By a second home,' he continues, 'I don't mean one continuously rented to another household. I mean a property used either as a personal holiday home or as a place to stay while working away from your main home'.³ Space to Breathe is not a singular solution to the structural complexities of the UK housing crisis, but by repurposing marginal land and creating new, responsibly-produced builds it does offer a release valve. It does not spell community death: community is at the very heart of the project.

EDRM situates Space to Breathe in a British history of vernacular leisure builds and sites that evade the strictures of housing and planning regulations: shacks, beach huts, and caravans. Makeshift shacks and sheds are ubiquitous in allotments across the UK, a familiar site often seen at the fringes of towns and villages or scattered among suburban developments. Land allocated for use as allotments was often simply land which did not find a more profitable use. As David Crouch and Colin Ward begin their classic study of the landscape and culture of allotments:

[T]he sites were usually just the spaces left over, behind the houses or factories, limited in access from roads, or in the floodplains of rivers, or enclosed by the sweeping curves of railway lines.⁴

The 1908 Small Holdings and Allotments Act consolidated previous legislation obliging parish, urban district and borough councils to provide allotments for the 'labouring population' in towns and cities where they could not be

² Robert Booth, 'Rural house prices in England and Wales rise twice as fast as in cities', The Guardian, Sun 20 June 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jun/20/rural-house-prices-in-england-and-wales-rise-twice-as-fast-as-in-cities>

³ George Monbiot, 'Second homes are a gross injustice, yet the UK government encourages them', The Guardian, Wed 23 June 2021; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/23/second-homes-uk-government-britain-housing-crisis>.

⁴ The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture, Faber, and Faber, 1988, p.1.

obtained privately through philanthropic individuals and institutions.⁵ In Germany ‘Schrebergärten’ sites, named after Dr Daniel Schreber of Leipzig, who believed in the necessity of exercise and outdoor recreation for the urban youth, were leased meadows divided into family plots, attached to playing fields, equipped with sheds and chalets.⁶

In the nineteenth century, ‘Schrebergärten’ sites were paralleled by the growth in popularity of Laubenkolonien (summerhouse colonies), a result of housing shortages and overcrowding in the rapidly expanding city of Berlin. Seeking retreat from inadequate housing, inhabitants erected chalets on rented land at the city’s fringes. Here, wilden Wohngebiete (wild housing regions) emerged where inhabitants squatted the land.⁷ In fact, in Vienna, in the wake of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1915, some 14,000 families squatted 6.5 million square meters of land. Considered central to the city’s identity, the housing officer of the newly formed Social Democratic Party devised plans to legitimise settlements by supplying surrounding urban infrastructure. As Charles Holland has written, drawing on Eva Blau’s *The Architecture of Red Vienna* (1990), this provided a ‘hybrid model for housing, combining the state’s ability to purchase and plan large areas of land with a desire to allow a level of individual autonomy and “dweller-control” in the production of housing.’⁸

In the UK, dweller-controlled vernacular building found unique expression in the plotlands that emerged in the interwar period – concentrated along the North Downs and south east coast – as accessible weekend retreats from the capital.⁹ Speculators took advantage of agricultural land values that began plummeting in the 1870s when the competitive effect of cheaper U.S. food imports drove owner-occupied farms to sell tracts of land – usually on floodplains and unproductive sites – to be divided and resold as plots of varying sizes. Haphazard, often without planning or service infrastructure, buyers erected shacks converted on-site from railway carriages,

⁵ See Margaret Willes, *The Gardens of the British Working Class*, Yale University Press, 2014.

⁶ David Crouch and Colin Ward, *The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture*, Faber, and Faber, 1988, p.136.

⁷ Ibid. Ward opens *Cotters and Squatters: Housing’s Hidden History* (Five Leaves Publications, 2002) by exploring the belief around the world that if you can build a house between sunset and sunrise, then the owner of the land cannot expel you. Many artists have been drawn to the beauty of allotment sites. For example, photographer Emily Andersen’s book *Paradise Lost and Found* (Hotshoe, 2009) contrasts ruinous postindustrial sites and thriving allotment gardens around Berlin. Jeremy Deller’s work *Speak To The Earth And It Will Tell You* (2007) is a long-term project in the Klein Gardens of the city of Münster – part allotments, part leisure gardens, with club houses in each for socialising and parties. Emily Richardson’s film *Memo Mori* (2009) traces the disappearance of the Manor Garden allotments in Hackney Wick, demolished to make way for the 2012 Olympics. At the seafront in Folkstone, Richard Wilson’s *18 Holes* (2008) is three unconventional beach huts constructed from concrete slab repurposed from the disused crazy golf course nearby. For the Mexican artist Abraham Cruzvillegas the concept of autoconstrucción is a concept central to his practice that, as he writes, ‘comes from a building technique that is led by specific needs of a family and by the lack of funds to pay for constructing an entire house at once. People build their own homes slowly and sporadically, as they can, with limited money, with the collaboration of all family members and the solidarity of neighbors, relatives, and friends’.

⁸ Charles Holland, ‘Do It Ourselves’, lecture, *Government and Housing in a Time of Crisis: Policy, Planning, Design and Delivery*, Liverpool John Moore University, 8–9 September, 2016.

⁹ Opening her text ‘From Plotlands to New Towns’, Gillian Darley captures the growing recognition in late nineteenth-century London of the need for space, light and air for the working poor. Housing reformer Octavia Hill’s report ‘More air for London’ noted the negative health impact of high density living in London’s East End. Increased mobility afforded by growing rail networks and opportunistic estate agents in part for the eastern reach of plotlands. See ‘From Plotlands to New Towns’ in *Radical Essex*, Focal Point Gallery, 2018.

buses, vans, trams, and even surplus army huts – whatever was to hand.¹⁰ In the days before green-belt restrictions there was little in place to check the proliferation of structures. Prefab kits and self-build plans were opportunistically marketed towards the plotlanders. ‘A landscape of scattered and irregular development,’ Colin Ward describes how this makeshift landscape ‘stood in contrast to the predictability of well-ordered suburban estates that were built at the same time’.¹¹

Freedom for some symbolised chaos for others. Preservationists, notably Clough Williams-Ellis, prominent mouthpiece of Preservation of Rural England (later Campaign for the Protection of Rural England), saw opportunists selling off pastures for a ‘struggling camp of slatternly shacks and gimcrack bungalows, unfinished roads and weatherbeaten advertisements’.¹² The plotlands became a symbol of ‘speculation, deprivation, visual disorder and social marginality, transgressing the preservationists’ morality of settlement, hardly a place and beyond public authority’.¹³ In 1947, the labour party’s Town and Country Planning Act put an end to the plotlands by establishing that planning permission was required for land development – ownership alone no longer conferred the right to develop the land.

But by the 1960s, with the emergence of the newly mobile consumer citizen there was growing frustration at the paternalism and implicit aesthetic values of planning standards. Within critical architectural circles the plotlands’ dweller-controlled design ingenuity served as an anarchistic model for development with minimum state intervention. In 1969, *New Society* magazine ran a series of iconoclastic and experimental articles that its pioneering editor Paul Barker called ‘Non-Plan: An experiment in freedom’. The subtitle elaborated a question that was put to the magazine’s fiercest polemicists, Reyner Banham, Peter Hall, and Cedric Price:

Town and country planning has today become an unquestioned shibboleth. Yet very few of its procedures or value judgments have any sound basis, except delay. Why not have the courage, where practical, to let people shape their own environment?

Each writer speculated on zones where planning restrictions would be suspended. Price took on the hinterlands of the Solent, ‘Montagu Country’; Hall the eastern reach of the Peak District, ‘Lawrence Country’; and Banham, a native East Anglian, took on ‘that most scared of sacred scenery’, ‘Constable Country’. Barker and Hall, writing in their conclusion, observed that ‘To impose rigid controls, in order to frustrate people in achieving the space standards they require represents simply the received personal or class judgments of the people who are making the decision.’¹⁴ Instead of listening to what planners, architects and other aesthetic judges think ‘ordinary people’ want, why not, they argue, simply ask these ordinary people what they want as the best guide to planning?

EDRM are not alone in exploring these dweller-controlled examples that today offer suggestive solutions to the orthodoxies of planning bureaucracy and the speculative development industry.

¹⁰ When I invited the social historian Ken Worpole to speak to a group of my students on small buildings at the Royal College of Art, London in 2015, he showed a slide of a plotland house in Maldon constructed over a year by its former resident who slowly took the timber from Tilbury Dock where he was a shipbuilder. For a sense of these landscapes see Ken Worpole and Jason Orton’s *The New English Landscape*, Field Station, 2013, and before that their collaboration *350 Miles*, self-published, 2005.

¹¹ Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward, *Arcadia for All: The Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape*, Mansell Publishing Limited, 1984, p.2.

¹² Clough Williams-Ellis, *England and the Octopus*, CPRE, 1996, p.66.

¹³ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, Reaktion, 1998, p.40.

¹⁴ *New Society*, No.338, 20 March 1969.

A 2017 government briefing paper claimed that 53% of people in the UK would consider building their own home given the opportunity. In the paper barriers to self-build include: land supply and procurement, access to finance, the planning process, and regulations and red tape.¹⁵ Architecture critic Charles Holland has advanced an 'updated form of plotland community' where the positive effects of individuals designing, building and managing their own homes is enabled by strategic Local Authority schemes to secure land and supply infrastructure. In the 2019 report *Land for the Many*, edited by George Monbiot, community-led developments such as the Garden Cities and plotlands are identified as models to empower communities to create their own homes and places. The report's proposal of a non-profit Common Ground Trust, akin to a Community Land Trust, would gradually discourage land and housing from being treated as financial assets.¹⁶

If non-plan speculated on sidestepping gatekeepers, EDRM are clear about the need today for architects to participate in the development process. 'The majority of the built environment,' they explain, 'does not involve architects.' In fact, according to the RIBA [Royal Institute of British Architects], only six per cent of new homes in the UK are designed by architects. This is a concern shared by others in the field.¹⁷ Volume house builders – churning out conventional, standardised sham vernacular designs – are concerned with the bottom line: profit over place. EDRM understand their role as mediating between the Local Authority planning department and the designers.

Recently, EDRM have become members of Social Enterprise UK, a community interest company to promote the interests of businesses with clear social and environmental missions. Space to Breathe has crystallised the practice's desire to reimagine the role of the architecture office as a social agency. Drawing on their considerable expertise, sites will be chosen where there will be a positive impact on biodiversity, for example unviable agricultural land or uncontaminated brownfield sites. Parks will be sited on sustainable locations on the periphery of towns or villages where public transport systems and other general amenities are nearby. Site users and visitors will support the existing rural economy by utilising shopping and other facilities offered by local businesses.

Plots will be of various sizes and shapes to suit the unique context, to break down uniformity and to provide shared space. Access to the plots will be via green paths, wide enough for vehicular access for loading. Dedicated car parking areas will be located elsewhere to keep the main site free of cars. Communal facilities on the site will include space for get-togethers and events, workshop and tool hire space, communal barbecue kitchen, and other recreational areas.

Loose design codes would be agreed with the Local Authority to regulate the size of the accommodation. Design codes would aim to be in the spirit of the National Planning Policy Framework to encourage high quality, innovative design that is sympathetic to the location. All proposals for building work will be agreed by the park committee. Clear licensing agreements between the park management and garden leases will be defined in line with government 'Park (mobile) homes' legislation.

¹⁵ Wendy Wilson, Research Briefing: Self-build and custom build housing (England), 1 March 2017; <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06784/>.

¹⁶ 'LAND FOR THE MANY: Changing the way our fundamental asset is used, owned and governed', George Monbiot (editor), Robin Grey, Tom Kenny, Laurie Macfarlane, Anna Powell-Smith, Guy Shrubsole, Beth Stratford, reproduced from electronic media, a report to the Labour Party, June 2019.

¹⁷ Cathy Hawley, 'Where We Can Live, Not Where We Have To Live', TEDx Talks, June 2020. Hawley, working with Mikhail Riches, was shortlisted for the 2016 Stirling Award for the design of high density, urban social housing in Norwich. Their earlier 26 dwellings at Elmswell in Suffolk has been celebrated for its sustainable design.

Commenting on Non-plan thirty years after its initial publication, Colin Ward cites the environmentalist Simon Fairlie who wrote in the 1990s of the need for planning machinery that exists to enable, or oblige, local planning authorities to foster experiments in 'low-impact development'. Fairlie describes uncannily what is a vision for Space to Breathe:

If permission to build or live in the countryside were to be allowed, not just to those who can afford artificially inflated land prices, but to anyone who could demonstrate a willingness and an ability to contribute to a thriving local economy, then a very different kind of rural society would emerge. Low impact development is a social contract whereby people are given the opportunity to live in the country in return for providing environmental benefits. Planners will recognise this as a form of what they call 'planning gain'. The mechanisms to strike such a bargain are for the most part already written into the English planning system.¹⁸

Space to Breathe is a site for living architecture. Architecture that also serves as contemplative 'case studies' for low-impact, sustainable user-led design. Second homeowners treat their properties as assets. Developers build cheaply, profit, and move on. In the summer months the impact of staycations in Suffolk is referred to by locals as 'Suffolkation'. A living, breathing organism constructed by the people for the people invested in its shared values and locality, Space to Breath is an urgent and timely intervention.

¹⁸ Simon Fairlie, Low Impact Development: planning and people in sustainable countryside cited in Colin Ward, 'Anarchy and Architecture: A Personal Record' in Non-Plan: Essays on Freedom, Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism, Eds. Jonathan Hughes and Simon Sadler, Routledge, 2000.