What can meaningfully be said about Byker in 10 minutes?

MIRROR

I start with the premise that over time Byker has increasingly become a site for projection – wrapped up in wider socio-cultural perspectives – it contains, reflects and refracts wider concerns and prior interests and agendas.

Politically some see Byker as a late project of Labour's great post-war welfare state drive, others point out that Erskine was commissioned in 1968 by a Conservative council keen to offer a contrast to other redevelopments of the city delivered under labour.

This bifurcation extends into the architectural realm, whilst it is certainly a late modernist project of large scale urban redevelopment it's design was also reactionary – formed of predominantly low rise housing, organic, non-hierarchical and informed by the mixed use of a mediaeval town as well as the garden city movement, with a playful openness to history that led David Knight to claim it as a proto post-modernist scheme.

The project embraces landscape at a range of scales to create a locally sensitive climate, yet it also appears to be a worryingly direct transposition of an ideal 'arctic city' concept developed in the late 1940s which leads to the Wall turning its back on the wider city with consequential effects on connection and commerce amongst others.

The rejection of a tabula-rasa displacement and replacement of the population was noted in the Grade II* Heritage Listing citation of 2007 which stated that 'The Estate's ground-breaking design – proved a pioneering model for its approach to public participation'. Yet even project architect Vernon Gracie living and working directly on site in the project office said their work in this regard had only 'made a modest advance in humanising the process of redevelopment'

Related to this, the redevelopment's architectural idiom – whilst full of delight, and evocative of democratic DIY in places – is somewhat alien to the North East, more resonant with Erskine's earlier projects in Sweden than a product of any form of local co-design.

Questioning the premise of redevelopment entirely, we could point to nearby areas of the city that retained terraced housing, now seen as desirable.

All this is without mentioning the collapse of industry that sustained a working population, the transfer of housing to a Community Land Trust and then to Karbon Homes, and a broader cultural shift from council to social housing.

With such conflicting narratives how can we be sure of the lessons we try to draw from such a place, not to mention their applicability many years later.

MYTHOS

And so, though close reading and investigation retains its value – I propose that over the 50 years since its initiation these varying discussions have served to shift Byker from case study into the realm of mythology – an abstraction where the veracity of the story lessens in importance and the potency of idea comes to the fore.

Of course, some of this mythology trips into the romantic – think of Erskine's free-spirited bicycle ride across Europe in the 1930s to settle in Sweden, his communing with nature by dwelling in a self-built, off grid box – and nuance is needed to refrain from bolstering that other pernicious myth of the lone genius architect when Byker was clearly an immense collective effort.

However, we also need stories to inform future action – interweaving inspiration and caution as we approach fresh opportunities, stories that articulate values and ideals.

For all its challenges, failures to meet its ideals, buffeted as it has been by global social-temporal forces, Byker offers a great story, an encouragement to invest in architecture at its best, as clients, planners or designers, a call to raise our aspirations and our standards. New Housing

Writ large on the Newcastle skyline is a reminder that architecture should involve people and care for their daily concerns, that we should hold a conscious consideration of climate and material sourcing, that the spaces and places in which we dwell should draw meaning from historic patterns.

Perhaps these are simple lessons, but without examples such as Byker they are easily lost when made concrete. And few places deliver these simple goals with such character and verve.

Of course, the application of these ideas could be wildly different today, as the landscape changes, but the reason that Byker is still visited by people from around the world is that it still offers fresh inspiration.

And in an often-cynical world I think such radical aspiration matters.

MANAGEMENT

To finish in Byker, the potential of these values, embedded though they may be within architectural form, is still subject to life post-completion.

For all this talk of a mythology we are left with an inhabited architecture, a site that is home for some 9,000 people. For the individuals and institutions that occupy and operate the development there is an opportunity to nurture – or stifle – the spirit that permeated its realisation.

My personal interest has been in the 60+ hobby rooms that were built into the redevelopment – small spaces for collective action – many of which stand vacant largely due to managerial neglect and misunderstanding.

A good number of these have been converted into dwellings – more conventionally manageable but an unmistakable erosion of the public realm – yet none have yet been reopened for community use – despite a commitment to do so in the bid manifesto of the Trust in 2011.

My work in Byker recognised that in order to enable these spaces to work, a social infrastructure is needed alongside physical space – and I proposed collaboration between residents, the Trust, local agencies and even commercial organisations to aid their re-occupation.

And so, as a public survey on their future is currently live on the Byker Community Trust's website I would like to make a direct appeal; that priority is given to restoring the best of these spaces – physically and socially – extending Byker's vision into the future.