

Concrete Thoughts: [Owen Hatherley and John Grindrod in conversation with Lynsey Hanley.](#)

Introduction

Bryan Biggs: Thanks for coming, I'm Bryan Biggs, the director of Cultural Legacies here at Bluecoat. It's been, I think, two years since we've actually done an event in here, so this is quite unusual. It's great for us, we're really pleased to be back in person, as it were. Particularly for tonight's event Concrete Thoughts, as its focus is on two new books; they're very heavy – we are selling copies over there a bit later on. They consider modernist architecture and our built environment, as among other things a place for congregation and public discourse.

So the Bluecoat has, since 2008 with this new development, proved to be a very conducive space for this type of interaction. We recently staged an exhibition downstairs, drawing on our archive, that considered the arts centre's changing civic role. This was further addressed in an online panel discussion which Lynsey Hanley, who I will introduce in a minute, she's convening this evening's conversation, participated in.

If you haven't seen that, you can see it on the Bluecoat website. That discussion looked at the challenging new landscape for arts and cultural venues coming out of the pandemic and the opportunities to become more public-facing, and engaged in discourse around what it is to be civic. As a gateway to the Liverpool One retail development for the last fourteen years, the Bluecoat, which was restored, extended and reconfigured in a major capital scheme that opened in Liverpool's Capital of Culture year 2008, has already had to adapt to a completely transformed and reoriented city centre, and to welcome a large and broader demographic of visitors.

As we make plans for the decade ahead, which will include the centenary of Bluecoat being the first constituted arts centre in the UK in 1927, we are looking at placemaking and how we can contribute to and indeed hopefully influence

the way the centre of Liverpool will change to address issues around climate change, environment sustainability and becoming a more inclusive city for its inhabitants. So we're delighted to welcome Lynsey back to Bluecoat, and she's going to introduce the two authors whose two books are the focus of this evening's discussions, John Grindrod and Owen Hatherley. We extend a warm welcome to both of them, to talk about their timely and substantial architectural books which are already generating much critical praise. Just a little background, architecture has been a long strand at Bluecoat. In 1910 – I'm not going to give the whole history, but...

In 1910, Charles Reilly, Professor of Architecture at the University of Liverpool, relocated his department here, so appalled was he at the school's premises that he'd inherited, which was Waterhouse's gothic red brick Victoria Building on Brownlow Hill, which he described as 'a less prosperous Prudential Insurance office', and he just loved the Bluecoat. Reilly's students departed the Bluecoat after 8 years but architectural practices remained as tenants in the building for much of the 20th Century. In 2017, on our building's 300th birthday, we organised a symposium called Concrete Utopias, that interrogated brutalist architecture, concrete poetry and musique concrète – I'm not sure that we arrived at any conclusions connecting these three modernist creative expressions. But a walking tour the day after of Liverpool's landmark concrete buildings from the Liver Building (made of concrete, if you didn't know that) of 1911 to the Metropolitan Cathedral of 1967, was really invigorating. I'm really looking forward to hearing this evening about the iconic buildings both loved and loathed that have since populated our contemporary urban landscape.

I mentioned our capital development earlier and we're very pleased that Owen has included this scheme in his book, *Modern Buildings in Britain*. I recently informed the lead architect on that scheme, Hans van der Heijden from *Biq Architecten* in Rotterdam, he said – I hope he's nice about us! I just want to read what he said because Hans had nothing to worry about. He says:

"The building is detailed to an extremely high standard and its high gable is appropriately maritime. When it was built the Bluecoat felt like a real holdout, a piece of scrupulous, long-term architecture standing in the kitchen of a particularly insufferable party. Now in cities that have money, ie. not Liverpool, cheaper, paler versions of Biq's attempt to use a modernised English vernacular are everywhere. They seldom possess the grace of this excellent little building."

So thank you for that Owen, that's great. I'm going to hand over to Lynsey, and just by way of an introduction, many of you know Lynsey as a contributor to the Guardian but also the Financial Times and New Statesman, and she's the author of two books; *Estates: An Intimate History* and *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide*. She's currently working on her third book for Penguin. She lives in Liverpool and is visiting research fellow at The Research Centre for Literature and Cultural History at Liverpool John Moore's University, and an honorary researcher in sociology at Lancaster University. So I'm going to hand over to her but one thing to say before I do is that we're filming tonight, if anybody doesn't want to be filmed, don't worry because we're only filming the speakers. But if you take part in the Q&A afterwards and you don't want your voice recorded, just let Louis know. He'll be the roving mic, and he'll edit you out of the final version. So over to you, Lynsey!

In conversation

Lynsey Hanley: Wow, what a good audience! Karaoke time. It's so exciting to be doing a face-to-face event with Owen and John tonight, after such a long break. There's nothing like actually meeting and talking in person, nothing else can quite replicate it. Thank you for coming out tonight and thank you Owen and John for coming up to Liverpool, to the Bluecoat. I'm dead excited to introduce both of them. John Grindrod is the author of *Concretopia* from 2013, *Outskirts* from 2016, and now the new *Iconicon*. Owen Hatherley is the author of so many books I can't list them all including *Militant Modernism*, a brilliant book

about Pulp called Uncommon, and the new Modern Buildings in Britain published by Penguin and Owen is the culture editor of Tribune magazine.

They're both here tonight to talk about their monumental new books, both years in the writing, both compendious, elegant, informative and best of all, very opinionated. So I don't think we're going to run out of things to talk about tonight. Owen's book Modern Buildings of Britain is a gazetteer – I love that word – of around a thousand of the best and most interesting modernist buildings in Britain, which he started working on seven years ago. You visited nearly every single building in the book on public transport, didn't you?

Owen Hatherley: Most of them. There were exceptions, which I mentioned at the end, like there's particular places in the Scottish Highlands, and bits of the West Midlands, actually. In theory the West Midlands ought to have a fantastic public transport system where you can get around this very large metropolitan area, but as you know very well, it doesn't. About 99% of it was by public transport which was why it took so long and why I went a bit funny at the end of it.

Lynsey Hanley: I'm glad to say that in both books Liverpool and Merseyside are very well-represented, as well. Because public transport is pretty good up here, isn't it? By comparison with the West Midlands, at least, anyway! John's Iconicon picks up in a way where he left off at the end of Concretopia, which traced the story of our post-war built environment. Many of the buildings in Concretopia also feature in Owen's book. Iconicon is about Barratt Britain – retail parks, new builds, out of town malls, privatised shopping centres and the dread word regeneration. Which in this book begins with the 1984 Liverpool Garden Festival.

John Grindrod: Yeah, absolutely. It was amazing writing about that. One of the weird things about writing this book, everything else I've written was about stuff that happened before I was conscious of it. It was really interesting researching stuff where I was a sentient being and these things had happened.

Some of them I had noticed and some of them I hadn't noticed, but it was a bizarre process of trying to see what was significant and what wasn't. The things that had lasted and the things that hadn't lasted, that were really interesting. The thing about the Garden Festival was that it's really lived incredibly long in the memory, although the site has changed enormously there's still a great cultural memory of it and of the festival. I was talking about it today on Twitter and loads of people were just sharing their memories of going to it, I found all that stuff fascinating.

Lynsey Hanley: Actually there's significant amounts of crossover in the two books, that you both feature John Outram's Pumping Station...

Owen Hatherley: I don't, I have the weird thing in Cainford but I don't the pumping station.

Lynsey Hanley: Oh not the pumping station, I'm sorry.

Owen Hatherley: I couldn't make a case for it being modernist.

Lynsey Hanley: Too post-modern!

Owen Hatherley: I do like it, but it can't...

Lynsey Hanley: What a shame. But in terms of the Bluecoat, as Bryan just mentioned, you regard this as very much an outlier in the period of the built environment in Britain that you talk about in your book, Iconicon. Shall I ask you first about the Bluecoat and the other one that really stands out for you is the New Art Gallery in Walsall isn't it?

Owen Hatherley: Yeah. There's a thing that's happening with both of us, people who have never really liked the architecture that we grew up with, trying to look at it objectively and trying to force ourselves to like it, in a way. One of the

reasons for that was irritation at the way that architects are really dishonest about how fashion-driven they are. The most fashion-driven thing, apart from actual fashion. The degrees to which your average large 20th century British architectural firm, something like BDP who did the masterplan for Liverpool One, will have gone through in their history nice 1950s festival of Britain modernism, brutalism, where they did a lot of really good buildings, some post-modernism which is often very questionable, a sort of 2000s New Labour slatted-wood modernism, and now the cladding everything in a grid of brick.

I suppose the thing that interests me, when it was built, about Bluecoat about Walsall New Art Gallery is that they seem to want to have their cake and eat it by being both modernist and aiming to be timeless. Round the corner there's a building by Piers Gough that was literally called at the time, the Bling-Bling Building. The amount of effort it is going to take to explain to people, in a few years' time, even now it's impossible to explain it all. At the time that seemed like a bit of an act of resistance, that you were not going to have a big Blair hat on your building, you were not going to have cladding materials which turn out to be flammable. You're just going to build an honest building, you're going to think about light, the way the light falls. You're going to think about materials and how they might age.

I don't think these are things that are antithetical to modernism by the way, but they're very much things that were quite antithetical to that New Labour era that John writes about. Then what happened is that everything tried to look like a bad version of a building by Hans van der Heijden or by Caruso & St John who did the Walsall gallery, so that everything is now clad in brick and everything is now a grid and it is just as awful in its own way! But that fashion has completely shifted, and all the architects concerned pretend that they've always done that.

Lynsey Hanley: Do you think it is significant that they are both art galleries?

Owen Hatherley: Yeah, I mean, so many of the good buildings of that era are and I suppose it gives you an opportunity to do something of context in an intelligent way, because there was often this thing, that actually does link those two eras, which is really stupid reactions to the idea of context. So there was a thing then, this building is covered in these patterns because they evoke the jewellery made in the Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham. There were architects like Meccanoo who did the, in my view dreadful, Birmingham Library, who just seem to specialise in covering buildings in historical reference cladding to convince the rubes on the planning committee. Now you have this, everything will be in brick because everything in Britain is made of bricks therefore it will be in keeping. Which of course is also not true.

What I liked about both of these buildings is they were very much about where they were, but not in a stupid way. The New Art Gallery in Walsall is all about the collection, its all about the fact that the Garman Ryan collection, which is a very interesting and very odd collection of 20th Century art, which used to be in a couple of rooms in the town hall. The entire building is designed around that and framing that, there's a kind of counter-tradition in a lot of British modern architecture, like Bennett & Forsyth in Scotland with their museums, and the British Library is another one, where they're all about revolving around this thing that you've already got, and displaying that and making something of that rather than the kind of teleport, parachute version where a thing comes from on high and then makes Walsall nice, which you're never going to do. If any of you have been to Walsall you'll know that's a fool's errand!

There's a similar thing with this, the way that it doesn't think, as someone would in the 80s, we are next to the Bluecoat so we must look like a cheaper version of the Bluecoat. But it is like, we're next to Bluecoat so we'd better show some respect. So you design in such a way that it accommodates that building without patronising it. So I think that is the thing which links them.

Lynsey Hanley: Yeah. Owen's book takes us pretty much to the present day, John's book starts in 1980 and continues pretty much to the present day, but ultimately Owen's book is about the legacy of modernism, and John's book is about the putative legacy of post-modern and everything that has come since. They're both, for these reasons, intensely political books. Reading yours John, what Owen just alluded to there was the sheer shoddiness of a lot of what's been built in the period that you're writing about. I think it's significant, firstly that one of the things you start with is the Liverpool Garden Festival but you also start with the development of Docklands. So basically, do you think your book is about, or came to be about, the completely ruinous effect of money and making money the central object of what the built environment has come to be for?

John Grindrod: That's certainly a big element of the story, it's hard to get away from. I'm conscious of trying not to write a really depressing book, who wants to read that?

Lynsey Hanley: It's not!

John Grindrod: Thank you. But the fact is, there are lots of really horrible stories in amongst all of these stories. It was, trying to find a way of telling the story of some of these things without making the whole thing feel like a very downward narrative. One of the things that really surprised me was that the millennium stuff, which at the time, I remember living through all that stuff being built and happening, and being slightly cross about it, in that way that I feel that British people are slightly cross about any new thing.

Then, years later, looking at that stuff and going – I really like quite a lot of these things, I like what they represent in a lot of cases. They haven't ended up representing the triumph of money, and I feel like there are so many things, the development corporations of this era are so different from the development corporations of the Concretopia era that I'd written about before,

where it was all about building a new town, it was a much more municipal idea. These ones were all much more about trying to find private partners, therefore the private partners are driving what gets built and what gets designed. The trouble with something like docklands is that you end up with somewhere that lacks basic amenities for the people living there, because there are loads of statement buildings. There's a sort of, we'll build some flats, and we'll build loads and loads of office space, but actually there's nowhere to just pop round the corner and buy some milk and do basic human stuff.

All that stuff is forgotten because the people investing in that environment aren't interested in that so much. I feel like you see a version of that happening everywhere that these development corporations happen and obviously Liverpool is the first place that gets one of these development corporations in this ilk, before docklands. It's interesting at that point, that the mega-development stuff that then happens a bit later in docklands, doesn't happen to Liverpool at that point. Obviously there is a mega development that happens a bit later on. But it's not part of that story, it's part of another story. I guess there are waves of this stuff as we go along, just when you think, it's a bit Kathy Bates in Misery. Just when you think that's over, it's dead now, it gets up and staggers on in a slightly different guise. It's not dead, it's come back to life!

Lynsey Hanley: Regarding lack of amenities, in developer-led... I was going to say developer-led developments, that's never going to fly is it! Developer-led housing and city centre built environments... what strikes me having read both books is the building that comes to mind isn't one of these modern day built-for-cash developments. It's actually more the redevelopment of Park Hill in Sheffield, which- can you quote yourself?

Owen Hatherley: I can't remember what I said but it was basically that they should be in jail.

Lynsey Hanley: Yes. They should be tried before a court of law, that's what you say.

Owen Hatherley: I do remember talking to someone about it who was like, in China you would in be jail for this. Then of course the big Chinese property development thing crashed and I don't know if they are in jail yet, but maybe they will be soon.

Lynsey Hanley: What, the Liverpool-?

Owen Hatherley: No, no! Oh god, and there's that! The whole Liverpool thing! This is subjudice, right? Park Hill – oh, god – I got this really weird review from a guy I'd been mean to a few times so I felt I deserved it. It said various things, one of which was that I should have gone to Worcester College in Oxford which is really boring, the other that I should have gone to Chelmsley Wood, you'll be glad to hear. The other was that I should have celebrated the regeneration of Park Hill.

The thing that struck me about that was, they haven't finished it! So Park Hill, for those that don't know, is a large housing estate that was copied all over the world. I once listened to a Jarvis Cocker radio thing where he publicly apologised to the people of Moscow in particular where there is a large copy of Park Hill in the Chertanovskaya district. It's about five interconnected blocks, fourteen storeys at the highest point, three at the lowest on a very very steep hill behind the station. It originally had a couple of schools, several pubs, various shops and bits and bobs, the usual urban things. It had the usual decline, unemployment rose and it wasn't particularly well maintained.

Then it got Grade II listed, thanks to Elaine Harwood, then the council were like, what shall we do with this? We can't demolish it, now. Let's give it to Urban Splash for a pound. This happened in about 2007, and here we are in 2022, and currently most of Park Hill is still derelict, one part of it, the entire building's interior, everything apart from the concrete frame was stripped out. They

replaced it with lots of shiny stuff to make it look like a, now very unfashionable, New Labour-era building with these very DoSaC / Thick of It-style colours. Then the second part, may just have finished, which was less aggressive because the architecture is fashionable now so you don't have to make it look like DoSaC. Then the other three parts are still derelict. And this was nominated for the Stirling Prize! They've taken five times as long as it took to build the thing to turn one part of it into luxury flats and another part into student accommodation while the rest of it is derelict, incidentally having never rebuilt the pub or the shopping parade or the schools. The thing is a fucking disaster! Anyone apologising for it either doesn't know what they're talking about or is being dishonest. Sorry!

Lynsey Hanley: The point is, in its original incarnation it really did have one of everything, didn't it?

Owen Hatherley: That's the weird thing about it.

Lynsey Hanley: As well as houses.

Owen Hatherley: Those of us who have lived on big peripheral estates will know that feeling, there's nothing really there. All three of us have. You've just been plonked somewhere. Park Hill is exactly not that – there's a load of pubs, it's really high density. It's got everything and it's right by the railway station. It's the absolute Richard Rogers-style best practice. That's what was so sinister about what was happening – there was all this propaganda about, ah it was a terrible idea, it was awful, it was a mad utopian thing. No, it's literal current planning policy! There's nothing wrong with this at all other than the fact that the people who live there are the wrong kind of people for the project that you're trying to do. It's just monstrous on so many levels.

Lynsey Hanley: Yeah. I think what is illustrated in both books is the absolute symbiosis and necessity of places to live in and places to dwell in happily

needing plenty of variety in terms of basic amenities but also variety in terms of access to other places and within the places as well. Which brings me to your discussion of Barratt Homes in Iconicon. Barratt Homes weren't built with these in mind, were they?

John Grindrod: No, no, absolutely not, no. Barratt was interesting because it was a marketing-led developer, and so what they did, they went out and focus grouped a load of people, worked out how much they earned, and then reverse-engineered a house to suit that. It was OK, we'll bundle together all of the stuff that you'll need in your kitchen as part of the mortgage, and we'll work backwards from that. So the houses were as small as they could be to accommodate the dreams of the person that had been expressed in the focus group. That was the idea, and all the other developers weren't really doing that but they saw Barratt doing that and it became very successful so they all copied it and it became this way of building an estate. They invented the starter home, which was this product.

That was the thing that happened, they became products, and a lifestyle product, and they stopped being... you look at Park Hill, that idea, it's a way that we want to live, thinking about the future and society as a whole, it's got these big ambitions. When you look at these Barratt estates, these cul-de-sacs, they're based on this thing called the Essex Design Guide, which was a 1970s design guide specifically for Essex that was all about building local material – following a local idea of picturesque housing, or whatever. The developers took bits of that idea, so superficially it looked like they were following this thing. But in fact, they didn't use any of the local materials and they didn't follow any of those ideas, they just kept things like the cul-de-sacs and a few of the basic tropes that had come up in the Essex Design Guide, but discarded all the things I think that guide was trying to do. Those estates, particularly those 80s estates, are so redolent of the period. I feel like, playing on that idea of icons, if we talk about architectural icons of the recent past, everyone thinks oh, the Gherkin, or something like that.

I think someone like Barratt Estates are icons of the 80s but in a different way. They're not architectural icons but they are icons of a way that we were sold a way to live, a way of living. The fact all those houses don't connect up. You have cul-de-sacs where all the houses are deliberately skewed away from one another so you don't look at your neighbour. It's all about not being overlooked, which is the opposite of those modernist houses where you'd have great big windows and you're not allowed to put in a hedge, there's all these very strict rules. Those new towns like Harlow, and stuff. On a Barratt Estate, they put up giant fences before anyone's moved in, and everything is already portioned off. That is an abrupt change of idea from even 70s Barratt, which is more like traditional streets, not those cul-de-sacs. 80s Barratt, suddenly it's this entirely new monster that they created that everyone then copied.

Lynsey Hanley: That's why, to discuss Barratt, in your book, it's more telling the story of Britain in the last 40 years than to talk about the Gherkin. To talk about the Gherkin and the Shard is to talk about one aspect but to talk about Barratt describes a whole phenomenon and a whole social shift, doesn't it? Whereas Park Hill, right by the train station, brought people together or was aimed to bring people together, Barratt atomised and helped to bring about the car-ification of Britain.

John Grindrod: Yeah, also that fact that as you were saying with Park Hill, it's got all the amenities that you could want, you are literally in the best possible place. Because these private estates are being built with no bigger idea of amenities, there aren't bus routes, there aren't train stations, there aren't the things that you would need to connect you physically to somewhere. Also at the same time you get the rise of the out of town shopping centre and the out of town business park and all of that. I was fascinated by that arrival as well, this push to the edge, to create these edge cities everywhere while at the same time, we've got the Richard Rogers task force trying to encourage people to densify and go back into cities again after decades of moving out to new towns

and stuff. That's an interesting story as well, we're moving in one direction for years, then suddenly oh no, we're going to definitely want to densify cities again. So it all becomes about brown field sites and all that stuff. Meanwhile those Barratt estates still happily being built on the edge as if none of that policy shift as happened. As we see, they're still going on.

Lynsey Hanley: Exactly. As I touched on before, you visited most of the buildings – did you say 99% on public transport?

Owen Hatherley: Something like that.

Lynsey Hanley: Do you think this means that tracing the story of modernist and modern buildings around the country, because you cover England, Scotland and Wales, don't you, the British mainland. Do you feel like the fact you were more or less able to access them on public transport means that the story of modern buildings in Britain is also the story of urban Britain?

Owen Hatherley: It is, and that means that the story is not the whole story. There are two things missing in the book. One is missing because I thought it should be missing and the other is missing because I couldn't really do it. The first of those is a lot of private houses. So the other book, the competition, as it were – a great book, and I don't regard it as competition in the moral sense, just simply it is the other book that does this – Elaine Harwood's *Guide to Post-1945 Listed Buildings*. It's different insofar as it's just post-1945 and it's just England and it's just buildings that have been listed. But it's a great book and I ripped it off a lot!

(LAUGHTER)

Particularly the earlier edition that you could fit in your bag, but then there's that later one which is so huge, you can't. About a quarter of it is private houses. The early stages of doing the book, the first draft was finished in 2017.

The early stages, I just constantly found that you couldn't see them. Even if you could get to this darkened corner of Berkhamsted, where there would be a house by Erich Mendelsohn or by Erno Goldfinger or someone incredibly famous. You'd get there and there'd be an enormously high gate and then a driveway... you know the scene in Clockwork Orange where they go to the guy's house? Which is also, isn't it a Richard Rogers and Norman Foster Team 4 house, come to think of it? Yeah, so anyway, that should be in the book but it isn't because as you'll remember from A Clockwork Orange, the droogs have to drive from the entrance to get into the house. Then the old ultra-violence occurs.

So I was just like, this is an undignified thing to do and I don't want to make people do it. So you shouldn't have to go to the outer reaches of Surrey on the off-chance that you can see a house from a distance behind a driveway. That basically takes 90% of private houses that are listed out of the equation because you just can't see them, unless you've rung up the guy that owns the Marcel Breuer house in Angmering in Sussex and been like, Sir! Could you please let me around your modernist house? Erm, that's no way to live, is it? I know that Pevsner used to do this, he would contact the people who owned these big stately homes and Susie Harries points out in her book about Pevsner that you can always see when he hates the people, which most of the time he does, and he's being led around by these ridiculous idiots and generally, inbreeding, it does what it does.

One of the reasons why lots of English Tories hate Pevsner, there's many reasons but one of them is that he always slags off country houses. He can't keep his dislike of those people out. The other thing was a lot of outer suburbs. I tried, I really tried, but there's a three page list of things I couldn't get in. Most of them are things that are out on the motorway somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Some of them, I would go to the station and hand over silly money to people to drive me in cabs. Norman Foster's amazing yellow hangar thing in the outskirts of Swindon, I did pay about £20 to go and see that. And the cab

driver did know what I was talking about, he was like, oh, that big yellow thing? Oh yeah, alright then. Loads of things like that didn't make the grade because you can't bloody well get to them. Unless you're willing to fork out for cabs or you know someone near by who can drive, you just can't really get there.

That is a really big part of the modernist story, because it is a car architecture, it's just a car architecture that imagines that you might also be a pedestrian. That tends to mean a good thing. Another Clockwork Orange thing, where the droogs live, the Thamesmead. On the one hand it's got these huge great big roads going through it but also there are all these paths, half of them along canals, that thread you through so it can be nicer for a pedestrian. The thing that Barratt doesn't do is that second bit. You drive, or nothing.

Lynsey Hanley: Yeah. The point is that so many of the buildings you include in the book are things that everyone needs made beautiful, aren't they? Like branch libraries, for instance.

Owen Hatherley: There are a lot of libraries.

Lynsey Hanley: Secondary schools, all of those things. I don't know if anybody from here lives in South Liverpool, but my local library, Allerton Library is included.

Owen Hatherley: That's because you told me to!

(LAUGHTER)

Lynsey Hanley: Or else! You didn't have to.

Owen Hatherley: It is a good building. I wouldn't have known.

Lynsey Hanley: It's a gorgeous building.

Owen Hatherley: Actually, that kind of cricket– is it cricket pavilion? Opposite...

Lynsey Hanley: Sports Pavilion.

Owen Hatherley: That is in the Elaine Harwood book, which doesn't mention the library opposite, which is a better building.

Lynsey Hanley: And of course, churches.

Owen Hatherley: I am a kind of, saying atheist doesn't quite work in that I was brought up in the Trotskyist church so I wouldn't say that I don't believe in God. I do find churches weird. Jonathan Meades once said I had, how did he put it? Sorry, for the name drop. I had a superstitious fear of churches. I think I did, for ages I felt uncomfortable in them because I felt like I was taking the piss. If I was going in them just to look at a building and everyone else was in there because they believed that the big man was going to help them out. I did feel a little bit like I shouldn't be there, and I kind of got over that eventually when I found that mostly people are just delighted anyone is in them. Particularly with a lot of what's in there are 1930s estate churches, because a lot of quite dull, artsy-crafty estates like Gipton in Leeds have amazing German Expressionist style churches. There's also quite a lot in the Wirral, the Francis Xavier Velarde buildings. Quite drab bits of the Wirral you'll get these amazing North German explosive brick buildings in there. They were mostly locked, actually.

Lynsey Hanley: Shame. Yes, by comparison if Owen's book contains a lot of necessary buildings made beautiful, Iconicon contains a lot of buildings that were built not necessarily for things that people need, such as business parks, out of town malls, endless, endless amounts of office building.

John Grindrod: Yeah, absolutely. It's a lot of disposable architecture in this period. People are supposed to have had some sort of environmental

awakening in the 60s and 70s, and you wouldn't know it to look at the things that are then built. There's that horrible thing that happens where out of town malls kill the high street and then online retailer sheds kill the out of town malls. It's this Godzilla-style rampage on a loop.

Somebody is allowing these things to happen, they haven't happened by accident. I know the necessary planning controls maybe that were there, haven't been doing their job. These are political decisions I think, they're not about planning. The planning is, we'll try and make these things better as individual schemes. But the political decision to have these things built at all is the thing that drives the weird landscape we end up with. I think there is this kind of horrible thing that happens where people want to have a physical legacy. I'm going to have this office building or regenerate this bit of town, the waterfront. A waterfront becomes a big thing in this period. If you can chuck up some waterside flats beside what had been a polluted waterway in this period people will do it, so everywhere ends up with somewhere that has got this. It's a peculiar thing because it feels like it isn't driven through necessity, it's driven through this idea of saying, look! We've done something, I, the person in the charge, have done something and I can now put a leaflet through your door saying I did that. There is slightly pointless stuff going on in this period which is remarkable given that we have housing crises and we have all sorts of things that actually are really necessary that weren't being built in this period, so that is a paradox.

Lynsey Hanley: Yeah, there's so much that you write about housing in the book but so much of the housing that you describe, I was constantly struck by how it didn't seem to meet people's needs.

John Grindrod: Yeah, and at the moment there's an enormous amount of flats being built and they're not necessarily the housing type that are needed for people that are actually really struggling. One of the architects I spoke to she said a lot of housing associations are building flats that are designed by

usually some young guy who thinks living in a flat that's got two bedrooms with an open plan living space is fine for everyone.

It's fine if you're that person, but it's not fine if you've got kids, or you've got a multi-generational house, or there are an awkward number of you that doesn't fit into the rooms. There's a really limited palette of stuff getting built that is not really reflecting the kind of lives people actually want to live or the reality of the world we live in. That is proving to be a really major issue. She was making this brilliant point that there used to be loads of little housing associations that used to be very specifically focused on individual groups' needs, and that was very helpful in that period when local authority housing was being cut back. Suddenly though all of those things are bought up by massive conglomerates, and it's a gulf that emerges between those communities and the people that are providing housing for them. That is a really sad thing that has happened, that consolidation of little organisations, small house builders, all those small companies that were doing stuff don't get the chance, now. Because who can deliver a giant, enormous masterplan for Thamesmead or somewhere? It's going to be Peabody, some giant, giant megacorp. It's not going to be your local architecture practice or your little local housing association or whatever. That's a really big problem that's happened, the loss of small, local organisations that have actually got an in with the people they're building the stuff for.

Owen Hatherley: That's such a New Labour thing, right? I really liked that particular bit in the book. So many of the people grew out of 70s and 80s radicalism and so they had certain things, even the GLC in the 80s on the left were very suspicious of big council housing. So this idea grew up that people like Blair inherited that council housing is bad and housing associations are good. Then they brought in a policy with stock transfer that meant that you got exactly the worst of both worlds. Something like Glasgow City Council just became, its housing department became a housing association. So they became the biggest landlord, at that point, in Europe. It was absolutely

senseless, the entire point of of housing associations is that if you don't fit into this particular council mass building model, we can do a small and interesting thing for you. Instead, you literally have this thing that nobody wanted. It was done solely in order to take loads of council housing off the books, there was no real idea behind it other than just looking at balance sheets and also, in Blair's case, he just thought council housing was ideologically unacceptable.

Lynsey Hanley: Yeah, and also just the basic loss of space standards. You know a lot about Parker Morris, don't you?

John Grindrod: Absolutely, that is something abandoned very early on in the period I write about, those ideas of space standards that come in in the early 60s. Actually there has been a reinstatement, or certainly a recommitment to the idea of space standards being a good thing in the last ten years. That's a positive thing that has happened, a recognition. At the same time, we've got the horrible abomination of people being able to convert other buildings into homes and flats without any of those planning rules applying, so you can just make tiny micro-flats because there aren't rules around that. And that is a terrible thing that has happened. That feels like a really emblematic political thing of our era. On the one hand you can say oh yes, we've got this wonderful thing, we're bringing back space standards which is a thing from the past that we now think is a really important thing. But actually it's only for this set of circumstances and outside of that you can just build these horrific things which are totally outside of those rules. That feels like our age, doesn't it, really?

Lynsey Hanley: Yeah. One housing development that you both mention is Peter Barber's Donnybrook Quarter in the East End of London. I don't know if anybody knows, but it is an absolutely gorgeous set of maisonettes built in the East End of London roundabout the year 2000? They were built by a housing association, as far as I remember. But Peter Barber has gone on to build some really excellent actual council housing, hasn't he?

Owen Hatherley: I rather think so. One of the things I like about his things, and it's a shame that they are all, as far as I know, concentrated in London.

Recently, a friend who has an in at Preston Council was looking at a recent proposal, and saying, this is terrible, what are we going to do? I was like, let me give you the email address of Peter Barber. Whether that will actually happen I doubt, but one of the things I like about them, because he's done dozens of these in the last five years, lots of them for councils and housing associations, is that they're quite standardised. That's a really big break with how a lot of these things have been being done for a long time.

For instance, when I take the train into central London from where I live, you can see the difference between council towers and private by the fact that council, there'll be three or four towers of the same design. They never do that, even if it's the same landlord and the same architect. They must rise up to a point, there must be some thing that shows each thing is individual even if they're identical inside. The thing I liked about his stuff, so much of the best stuff that's happened, lots of Liverpool housing of the 30s and the London housing of the 50s, is very much, you've got a pretty standard unit. And you can shift it about, you can use that unit to make something that's got four bedrooms or it's got one, but you have a stylistic thing that fades a bit into the background and you can rejig and build a lot of it cheaply without it being crap.

This is an idea, I think a lot of places, a lot needs to be built, and quite quickly if we're going to get out of this mess, which we're not. That's a much better way of thinking about it, than the idea that everything has to be special and nothing can be, to quote Alistair Campbell, bog-standard.

Lynsey Hanley: I think what's significant about his housing is it shows you can build in quite a self-similar way without it looking really uniform and boring, which of course, so much new private housing looks anyway. I just want to, from John's book, there's a quote from Peter Barber which I absolutely loved which I think gets to the heart of what he's trying to achieve with his council housing: "I

remember there was a woman, an elderly woman, who used to stand at her gate all day long and everybody knew what was going on, on the street, because she was a sort of conduit.” That was in the kind of street layout that he grew up being familiar with. I know that in Liverpool at the moment, over the last few years, the restoration of the Welsh Streets has basically restored that sense of not uniformity, but replicability, in that area, through a number of redevelopers. You talk about both the Welsh Streets and the Granby Four Streets in your book, that's a really hopeful note, isn't it?

John Grindrod: Absolutely. That was such a lovely story to investigate and write about, to walk around those streets and talk to people. A very hopeful thing. It really goes against the grain of the era, lots of big top-down strategies that get replaced by other big top-down strategies. Just to have some really powerful residents, who are going to actually change the landscape themselves, sick and tired of being overlooked or having all these schemes come along that are going to knock down their houses, and then they never happen, so you've just got that endless planning blight of an area.

Just to take control of that situation and say right, we're going to make things better ourselves, no one else is going to do it for us. Then pulling in relevant help, people that can help them realise the things they want to do rather than telling them, this is what you want to do. I think the whole story is so incredibly heartwarming. I also had a brilliant experience, I get terribly shy going round taking photos of places or even looking at places sometimes, where people are staring at you. Because there's no reason why some creepy bloke is walking around taking photos of their houses, it's a terrible scenario. I was in Docklands and I was taking some photos of some houses in a completely deserted street. I took a photo of the whole street and posted it on Instagram and somebody immediately posted a message under it saying, there are children in there! I thought, oh, just delete it. I took it down.

I was in Granby a couple of weeks later and I was taking photos of houses and this woman came out of her house and she was really affronted because I hadn't taken a photo of her one. She was like, why haven't you taken a photo of my house? She was so proud of it and it was so funny, it was lovely, heartwarming. I thought, there's a real philosophical difference going on here with people feeling that these are their homes, that they're really proud of. It's not some defensive, aggressive act of having a house.

There's a sense of generosity here, that the houses are more than just being individual homes. They are a community, the lives of the homes are spilling out onto the street. I don't think I've ever seen a street outside, houses being so well-used, all the time. It's the only time I've been anywhere that people are doing the stuff you see them doing in an architectural drawing. You know how people are always happy and flying a kite? They're carrying children on their shoulders and all of that. It's the only place I've been that feels like oh, people are actually doing some of that stuff! I can't believe it! Of course it's the place where the architects have been dead for a hundred years.

Lynsey Hanley: Well, gosh, time is marching on. I've suddenly realised that we've only got about twenty minutes left, so it would be really nice if we could open it out and see if anybody wants to ask questions to Owen and John. There's an extra mic coming around for anyone that wants to ask one.

Audience Questions

Question: Thank you. You both- one of you certainly mentioned the idea of timeless building. This is a three part question, really. Is it a good thing a building might be timeless, can you think of a building that might exemplify timelessness from either of the selections in your books and is it possible to legislate for timeless building?

Owen Hatherley: Are we doing them one at a...? I suppose, I'm interested when people try it. I think it's impossible. I think there's no such thing as a timeless

building. That's why they're fun, that's why they're interesting, they tell you so much about each time. A lot of why I like architecture is that it is not timeless. An 18th Century building will tell you so much about the 18th Century, a 1970s building will tell you so much about the 1970s and I really, really enjoy that. But I think there is a lot of architects, particularly ones who studied at Cambridge for some reason, who get really into this idea of, my thing will stand as an eternal monument that can stand forever. The Bluecoat extension that we are in now, I think that's kind of what the architect was thinking and I find it an admirable thing to try. But I think that people will look at it and see it as a building that came about in a particular time and says things about that time and I think that's OK. I think it's good.

John Grindrod: Yeah I agree. I'm much more interested in buildings that exemplify their time. Sometimes when a building is pretending to be from a time that it isn't from, or attempting to pretend to be timeless or out of time. Those buildings quite often feel like they date badly, because they aren't entirely of the moment they were designed. There's a bad thing happening at the moment which is a lot of 20th Century architecture is under threat of being demolished and replaced with other stuff because it isn't felt to be, we hadn't reached enough history, enough time hasn't passed to make these buildings feel completely part of everybody's version of their town. So as a result they get ripped down and replaced by something else.

I think towns and cities really lose something when we pretend a whole era or a whole style was never here. A city like Birmingham is a terrible example of that all the time. Constantly pulling down quite recent buildings and having this fit every 40 years, going - oh we're going to get rid of all of those, the last 40 years were awful, we don't know what we were thinking, we'll just get rid of them all. We'll put an entirely new version of that up and 40 years later you know that's just going to happen again. That is the opposite of timelessness. There's an effort there among the people planning those things, they think they are doing something timeless but we should celebrate the times that buildings are

actually from and the fact that they are different and varied and we don't live in a monoculture of the same sort of thing.

- I agree with what you're saying there about buildings being of their time, but earlier on in the talk you were actually being very critical of that. You were saying, this is all very modiste, this is the closest thing to fashion apart from fashion. So you can't have your cake, you can't have it both ways, can you? Can I just say that, what is the solution to this? Why has Britain continually had a massive shortage of houses? Why can that not be addressed?

Owen Hatherley: I suppose that's two things - the first one, I like fashion! Fashion is good. I just find there's a particular thing with architects, that they talk like they are at Plato's Academy in ancient Athens, and act like Janet Street Porter. I find that irksome, and I think if you're going to do that, just say what it is you're doing. There's a lot of architectural firms that just change style radically every five years but always act as if they're doing it motivated by the same pure ideals about space and materials and style never went into their head. And I'm like, shut up, of course it did. But I like style and I like fashion, I think they're good things, I don't think they're insults. But a lot of architects think that both of those terms are insults.

On housing, I mean, we did solve that problem between 1945 and 1979. Not 100 percent, homelessness did continue, people did have problems with their rent, some council housing wasn't that great. But the problems were, to a degree that we've never really seen before or since, were solved. Which is one reason why I think a lot of young people are very into modern architecture, because they associate it with the idea that problems can be solved. We have a political system and a media which insists constantly that problems can't be solved.

Q: You seem very negative about all sorts of developments.

Owen Hatherley: I'm a miserable git. But I try to be... yeah. I thought John could do the optimism, and he has.

John Grindrod: Yeah. Not really a lot of optimism about the right to buy. That's a thing that happens after that period Owen is talking about. We have the right to buy, we sell off all of these houses at the same time there is a moratorium on building more to replace the ones that are being sold off. That has, out of all the factors, that has been the single biggest factor in leading to a housing shortage. I'm delighted to see there are some amazing architects now designing council housing, and there are companies set up by local authorities to try and build council housing. But that has been a total mixed blessing. I'm from Croydon, Croydon's bankrupted itself on that scheme to try and build council housing because they had an artificial idea of the amount of money it would bring in.

They hadn't factored in the time lag of you have to spend all this money to make the money further down the line, all those issues that have now meant the council is bankrupt. So I'm really glad there has been a shift, there are loads of people designing council housing now, if you talk to any architecture student they're all obsessed with designing council housing, they're all obsessed with Peter Barber. They all want to do that, to be that, that's a really lovely and optimistic thing but until the political weather changes and that stuff is seen as more acceptable on a mass scale, we will never get to solve or fill that huge hole that opened up after the right to buy.

Question: Hiya. I was going to say, so, residential architecture is led so heavily by developers and ultimately the budget, and getting that as small as possible. So how do we, as architects and people in urban design, how do you break that mould? What do you think is the key to breaking that mould, that the budget drives everything and creates low quality mass housing?

Owen Hatherley: There's a really weird thing, I suppose this is going to sound over-theorised but there's a thing is linked to Neoliberalism in this really obvious way. The British Housing System is both incredibly over regulated and at the same time, capable of cladding buildings in stuff that's flammable. So you have this strange combination of everything you don't need regulated, such as minor things about housing that make the plans of housing very boring, things like secure by design that make a lot of places very miserable by surrounding them with spikes and cul-de-sacs and so forth. So we have all those regulations that stop you doing anything interesting.

But we somehow don't manage to have regulations that can stop developers from building stuff that's going to go on fire. So there's this weird thing, it's a free market system at quite an extreme level on one side but also one in which there's this bizarre and Kafkaesque state regulations part of it. It's a worst of both worlds situation. One thing that strikes me, I remember talking to Emma Dent Coad who was the MP for Kensington for a couple of years and in that capacity was very much associated with the campaign with justice for Grenfell. She was an architect and an architectural historian and so understood the system and why it was producing things like Grenfell, why it wasn't producing decent housing. I found that a lot of other people involved with housing at a political level, the Shadow Housing Secretary at that point was a guy called John Healy who knew absolutely nothing about housing, there's a real lack of knowledge about how this thing works.

This idea that in order to get things working, you make the machine that exists, which is Barratt and Persimmon and so forth and you make that machine then do council housing. It doesn't tend to work out, for obvious reasons. You really have to look at the entire regulatory system of it and turn it upside down. You also have to, in Roosevelt New Deal style, take the big volume house builders and either nationalise them or break them up. And put them all in prison.

(LAUGHTER & APPLAUSE)

Lynsey Hanley: Can you top that?

John Grindrod: I'm not sure I can, I'm afraid.

Lynsey Hanley: Does anybody else have another question for John, Owen or both?

John Grindrod: Or you.

Lynsey Hanley: There's one question I'm dying to ask both of you actually, if anybody is still having a think. Is there a push comes to shove all time favourite building in Britain that either or both of you have?

John Grindrod: I would say my favourite... I've got two. One is Coventry Cathedral and the other one is the National Theatre, they're my two favourite buildings I think. I have very lovely personal memories of experiencing those buildings and I think that, regardless of the architecture and the history of the building, if you have that extra personal thing, you feel like you are in some way connected to it. The National Theatre represented for me an escape, somewhere I used to go and hang out all day and marvel at before I realised I was an architecture geek, really. I think it made me an architecture geek, hanging out there and on that South Bank of the Thames. That place really means a lot.

Lynsey Hanley: Anything from the Iconicon period that comes close, do you think?

John Grindrod: Well, as I say, I do really like a lot of the millennium projects for that optimistic sense. I was very sad to see the dome get shred the other day, I think after years of everyone else shredding it, for it actually to be shredded was suddenly very sad. Of all of those, the millennium centre in Cardiff, which

got really bad press when it started. It wasn't an Opera House, it wasn't a Zaha scheme, it was much more modest. But when you go round it it's so incredibly well used, there's a lovely sense of that building being a really cohesive asset for a country. It's an amazing focal point that maybe the Opera House wouldn't have been, it would have been a different thing. So that building – it's funny, I talk to people about that building and they go, oh god! Urgh! I think actually it's brilliant. It makes your heart swell, it's so lovely. Not in a heart attack way.

Owen Hatherley: It's in my book and I remember, one of the times I was going back to Cardiff to try and make up my mind what I thought about all of that. It is a good building, but I think the problem with Cardiff Bay is that it had two very good buildings. One good building that's not there anymore which was that weird Alsop thing, and the Pier Head building which is also quite nice in a Prudential Assurance way. Then around it, some of the worst public spaces and retail buildings and restaurants that you've ever seen. So it was this really, actually, the designers of those two buildings have done their utmost and everything else just went to pot.

I think I'm talking about the Millennium Centre so I don't have to answer the question. So, the ones that came to mind, I raced through a whole load and was like, no. I immediately thought, in terms of Rodney Gordon who designed various amazing brutalist buildings, most of which have been demolished, only one of which is in the book, which is Eros House in Catford which hasn't been demolished but has been altered very badly. He talked about his idea of architecture being something which, and you should adjust this for your own genitalia, something that gives you that feeling from your balls to your throat. The best buildings are those that exactly do that, they give you that quake – this is a thing! Sometimes that buildings that do that are ones that actually in loads of other ways I find really problematic. So there's always a disjunction between as architectural historian and liker of architecture, and as trot, the Lloyd's Building is a really big one of that.

I think the Lloyd's Building is an absolute architectural masterpiece, it's as good as Hawksmoor. It's one of the finest buildings built in London by anyone in the 2,000 years that city has existed. But I always feel a bit uncomfortable about it because it's built for an office of slave underwriters, it's got a moat around it as a security feature, and the architectural theory about it, the idea that it could be adapted and so forth, is total bollocks. Because they detail everything so beautifully that nobody would want to adapt it, because why would you want to take anything away from this gorgeous machine? So I have this constant push / pull thing, I love everything about this but also find it really maddening.

So then I was like, could be the Barbican, but no, it's far too pleased with itself, so not the Barbican. Then I thought Park Hill, and obviously I've already talked about that. So I've got three, and they're all things where if I'm ever in that place, I make a point of going to check up on it. One is the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill On Sea, which is just such a gorgeous, generous public building. Such a sense of lushness and futurism that's done with you rather than at you, as Ian Nairn once said about something else. And I also like that building especially because it so much exemplifies that fact of, although modernity was very much invented in Britain, I think, modernism is a thing that there's always been a problem with. So you have this situation in the 30s where people like Mendelsohn and Gropius brought us the gospel.

I think a lot of relationist historians are doing this like, no, no, everything was fine in the 20s. Lutyens was great, it's absolutely fine that everything was classical in the 20s and 30s. I disagree with this, I think it's good that a load of German Jewish refugees came here and gave us good modern architecture. I thank them on a regular basis. The other one is the Byker Estate in Newcastle, any time I'm in Newcastle I go there and I check on it. The way that squares various circles – it feels like a huge great collective work, and a huge part of the city in which people live in one large entity, but it also has incredible attention to detail and individuality, the small scale and the giant scale at once, in a

really impressive way. It was pretty much the last big estate to be built and it showed that you could have just kept building estates like that. People were learning. It was so much an estate that was like, we like some things about Park Hill but we don't want to do that in the same way, because sometimes people find that alienating, so we're going to do it like this.

Instead of it having loads of successes it didn't have any. It's the real, road not taken. I'm often very moved by going there. The other one is Wyndham Court in Southampton, which is a big and very aggressive brutalist mini-estate outside Central Station. It's where I grew up and that's my experience of the thing that got me into architecture. That building, you can pull all these evocations of it looking like a ship or like a castle or a Jacob Epstein Rock Drill sculpture, all sorts of things. It also has the fact that the flats inside are really big and really nice, which is an important part of this which is lost a lot in a lot of recent housing. I'll stop now.

(LAUGHTER)

Lynsey Hanley: Yes. Before we finish, is there a teeny tiny question? Otherwise we need to wrap up now. Yep, it'll have to be a quick one.

Question: It's three words! Are we doomed?

Owen Hatherley: I'm still a member of the Labour Party, somehow. I think mainly because I've just pretended it doesn't exist. I started doing this sort of thing in about 2007/8 and gave one of the first public lectures I ever gave at Liverpool when it was Capital of Culture, at the Tate. At that point, not so much in Liverpool but in a lot of other cities, an analysis like this – if you can call it an analysis! The stuff we're talking about, people would look at you like you had two heads. If you were to say, we need a load of council housing, privatisation hasn't worked, the private finance initiative is a bad idea, cities should be more collective, people should have more democratic power in how they're built.

People would generally in 2008 be like, what's your problem? Everything's wonderful. What could you possibly not like about Liverpool One? I actually don't mind Liverpool One, but do you know what I mean? There was very much an era of – this goes back to the importance of being a miserable git – at that point, there was a real kind of Super Lamb Banana era of 'everything's brilliant!'

(LAUGHTER)

It wasn't brilliant and it stored up a whole load of problems which we're now having to suffer through, and because of that, by and large, a lot of people now have the view that we need to build a lot more social housing. The free market can't do everything. The privatised utilities have been worse since they were privatised. These are things that I think the majority of people, a small majority in most of the country but a large majority in Liverpool or London, now think these things. So the next step is to have political representation for those views so you can enact them in Government...

(LAUGHTER)

John Grindrod: I was doing stuff with some architecture students the other day in Nottingham, talking to them, it's very hard not to feel optimistic in the way that they were approaching their work, the way they were talking about their ethical stance on what they were building, the sustainability and eco-credentials of how they were trying to do it. How they were facing up to all these big problems that we're all agonising about. So from that, and from working with them, I'm feeling optimistic that there is an engaged generation of people coming up and that there is a sea change, as you say, that it doesn't feel like these things are such an outrage as they had once seemed. At the moment we are squatted on by the worst possible group of leeches, so until those people are chased to the moon by spiders or something, I don't know what we do, really. But I think, bubbling up underneath that horrible corruption, there is something good and I have to cling onto that.

Lynsey Hanley: That is a really good note to end on, I think. Thanks you Owen and John, can you please show your appreciation.

(APPLAUSE)

Owen Hatherley: Thank you very much.