

## Common Mural

by Owen Hatherley

One of the founding documents of modern architecture is a strange and initially quite obscure essay by Adolf Loos, entitled 'Ornament and Crime'. Loos makes some very peculiar judgements about ornament and makes some vaguely creepy analogies, and it's not entirely clear that he isn't taking the piss, but the gist is this. The sort of ornament that was draped over the big imperial buildings of turn-of-the-century Vienna, Budapest et al is not, as its makers thought, a sign of sophistication or grandeur, but a simple-minded and superficial affectation which is in fact related more closely to the way that 'primitives' decorate their buildings and themselves. He compares ornament to the act of tattooing, and because, he tells us, mainly criminals have tattoos (maybe so, in Vienna in 1910), there is a link between ornament and crime. What Loos would have made of tagging we don't know, but it's easy to guess.

If, then, a hypothetical totally unreconstructed modernist would likely believe ornamentation and graffiti are basically the same thing - a way of slathering your identity over something in order to feel more secure, to feel more in ownership of it - then the wave of public attention devoted to graffiti that emerged in postmodernist circles could well be the narcissism of small differences. In the 1980s, geographers, planners, architects and royals favoured an interestingly deterministic argument about why vandalism - of which graffiti was considered to be a major part - took place on modernist housing estates, and made similarly blanket recommendations for solutions. The most complete statement of this position is in the work of the openly Thatcherite geographer Alice Coleman, collated in her then popular book *Utopia on Trial*. Coleman, through a meticulous survey which counted broken windows, turds and tags yet made no assessment whatsoever of what one might have thought were equally important problems such as rates of poverty and unemployment, came up with statistics and graphs that 'proved' certain typologies induce certain behaviours. The ideal place that could cause, by its very design, various acts of vandalism and petty crime, contained the following things: walkways, towers, a lack of private gardens and clear 'front doors', and an ornament-free, blank, modernist aesthetic, particularly involving concrete as the material of the building's facade. The fact that, say, London's Barbican estate had all of these things and had an extremely low crime rate, little or no vandalism and a population of extremely rich people did not significantly affect her argument. It was simply to be ignored.

Where this connects back with ornament and graffiti, though, is Coleman's stated solutions. Unlike contemporary councils, or right-wing astroturf 'campaigns' like Create Streets, she did not support demolishing the housing estates which, she argued, created crime via their design. Instead, they were to be given extremely interventionist redesigns. You can see the influence of this in estates from Hackney to New Cross to Sheffield to the Gorbals, where high modernist layouts have been altered by giving ground floor flats front or back gardens, selectively demolishing towers, removing walkways and public spaces, and an extensive use of architectural applique: onto the concrete were attached big pitched roofs, half-timbered details, brick cladding, bright colours, and sometimes classical details such as columns and decoration. This came along with what seem to be less aesthetic, more practical measures such as entryphones and concierges in blocks, which gave working class housing something that middle class flats had always enjoyed. Few of these estates registered significant declines in crime after being 'Colemanised', which is perhaps one reason why this practice fell out of

fashion after the 1990s - though the 'securing by design' of estates through fences and gates continued, even gaining legal sanction.

Which brings us to Julika Gittner's 'Common Enemies', where a series of artworks are based on a 'mural' produced on the Bayard Estate, London SE15. The extensive changes to this estate since the 1980s have involved little in the way of demolition or recladding - an increase in security features, a strong tenants organisation and maintenance seem to have worked better than clearance or determinism. Graffiti is regularly cleaned off the clipped facades of the estate's mid-rise towers. However, Gittner's works focus on one particular area of graffiti which couldn't be painted over or sandblasted - the scratched tags, messages, boasts, declarations of love and scrawls etched onto the brick walls surrounding the communal greenspace. Because they can't be removed, they stand there as an eternal monument, likely to stand there as long as the buildings do, like the scrawls etched into Hadrian's Wall by bored Roman legionnaires.

It's apt, given the estate's location. If there's one borough in London which fits Alice Coleman's 'utopia' most closely, it is Southwark. Despite a council which decided in the 2000s it was a 'central London borough' and so set about decimating its social housing stock and prostrating itself before property developers, it is still one of the parts of Britain most completely dominated by local authority housing of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Going south from the Elephant and Castle, from SE1 to SE15 to SE5, you could go almost contiguously from the Heygate (deceased), the Aylesbury (on life support), North Peckham estate (rebuilt), Bayard (see above), Wood Dene (demolished) and Sceaux Gardens (still there, despite a lethal fire in one of the buildings leading to calls for demolition), among others. Apart from the Aylesbury, which was a project of the London County Council, these were all done in-house by the local authority. Architecturally, they range in style and quality, but all of them have been the object of demonisation, particularly by the local authority whose forbear built most of them. Via a version of Coleman's argument, an equation has been made - bad concrete, bad walkways, bad lifts, bad people - and attempts have been made to attract a 'better mix' by building flats aimed at the affluent, increasingly often in place of council housing.

Within this is a strange doublethink. On the one hand, everything officially takes place via 'consultation', which can range from quite careful collaboration with residents to sparsely attended coffee mornings and spurious, loaded surveys. On the other, estate dwellers are regularly portrayed as being incapable of running or understanding their own affairs. Occasionally, the two are combined, as when protesters against the demolition/cleansing of Heygate or Aylesbury are portrayed by the council leader Peter John as outside agitators, not 'real' residents at all, who are presumably happy about being moved out of their homes to make way for a better class of person. This work derives from an estate where this hasn't happened, and isn't likely to. However, the discourse goes on. Nobody would make the claim, like Loos, that what people do to their buildings or bodies is 'primitive', because that sounds vaguely racist or eugenic; but the equation is still regularly made between aesthetics and crime. Accordingly, anything that lowers the tone of the area is likely to be wiped off. The 'common mural', entirely by accident, will remain. It's not likely to find itself in a book of graffiti or street art - it isn't colourful, it isn't particularly beautiful, and it isn't by a recognisable artist. In fact, that may be what makes it interesting in the first place, the very fact that it's made, over the years, overlaying each other, by the usually voiceless collective, saying nothing