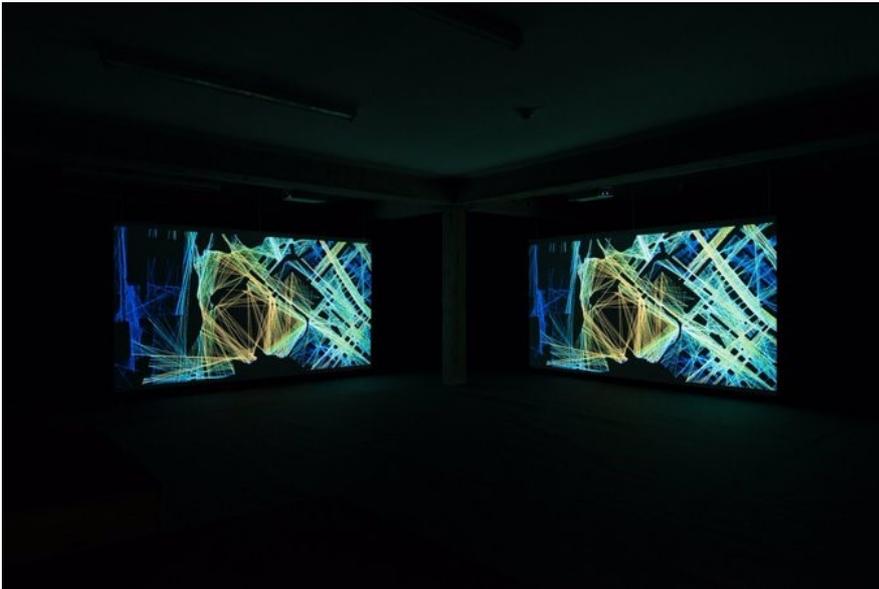


## Mapping Urban Form and Society

# Park Hill and the architecture of community

Next week I will be travelling to the Park Hill Estate, Sheffield to participate in a panel discussion at [S1 ARTSPACE](#) on the relationship between buildings, landscape and community with the artist [Ilona Sagar](#) and Dr Alex Taylor from the [Centre for Human-Computer Interaction Design](#), City University. (Tickets still available [here](#)). S1 ARTSPACE is hosting Ilona Sagar's newly commissioned film and solo exhibition called 'Deep Structure'.



*Still from 'Deep Structure' showing space syntax analysis of the Park Hill estate and its surroundings by Pises Isarangkool Na Ayudthaya, film copyright Ilona Sagar*

'Deep Structure' is a beguiling film, informed by the artist's deep dive into the Sheffield Archives and the Local Studies Library, as well as her extended interviews with past and present residents of the estate. The film aims to add complexity to the official narratives around its history by experimenting with the scale of speech, from the bureaucratic and instructional to the emotionally intimate and physical, where voice and sound acts as both a dislocation and a connecting element within the work. It is visually complex too, using scanning, space syntax techniques and archival data-sets to create detailed images of the building as solid, and as visual and accessible space. The film conveys the detailed social analysis that was undertaken post occupancy, to see if the concerns about high rise living were justified.



Flats with deck access. Source: Municipal Dreams blog post: <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2013/04/16/the-park-hill-estate-sheffield-streets-in-the-sky/>

Park Hill has lodged in many people's conception of the history of modern architecture of Britain as an easy narrative of architectural experimentation imposed on the urban poor, decline, and regeneration by developers (with the added ingredient of criticising redevelopment as gentrification). The story, as always, is more complicated. The estate replaced "a close-packed mass of insanitary back-to-back slums and other unfit housing..."<sup>[1]</sup> Its utopian architectural ambition stemmed from a desire to, as much as possible, design a scheme that replicated the positive aspects of close-packed living on the terraced streets that it replaced, with deck access wide enough to enable social interaction (and, famously, milk bottles delivered to the door). In many ways it represented the culmination of the dreams of an era, to 'rebuild Britain for the baby boomers', and contemporaneous interviews with residents show how proud they were of being part of a project that was at the forefront of architectural innovation.<sup>[2]</sup>



Overlapping view-sheds from all the decks, showing that the interior courtyards of the estate are much more visible than the surrounding city. (Image courtesy Pises Isarangkool Na Ayudthaya)

Alison Ravetz shows how the decks were 'allegedly the product of close study of working-class life by [the architects] who sought to reproduce the safe and sociable streets of yore without the danger and din of traffic'<sup>[3]</sup> Yet she also outlines how the complicated arrangement of interlocking plans, with deck access only at alternate floors, meant that the design did not always fulfil its ambition. Our own space syntax analysis, undertaken by Pises Isarangkool Na Ayudthaya as part of his [MSc Space Syntax: Architecture and Cities](#) dissertation, systematically captured all the possible views from all the access decks, highlights an aspect of the building that Reyner Banham mentioned in his Architectural Review article from 1961:<sup>[4]</sup>

*But the deck system is more profoundly involved with the design of the apartments than this, since it is a rule, throughout the building, that living rooms shall have the preferred, sunward aspect, and the deck be on the other, bedroom side. Since the building changes direction several times, the deck, on almost as many occasions, has to change from one side of the block to the other – hence the observation that the building has two façades (public and private, so to speak) not always on the same side.*

— Banham, R. (1961). "Park Hill Housing, Sheffield." *Architectural Review* 131 (December 1961): pp. 403-410.

The result of this switching from side-to-side is that some of the decks have views of the city, while others of the courtyards. Depending on how high you are from the ground level, this might shape your possible navigation around the scheme quite profoundly. The relationship between what you can see and where you can go is sundered, especially in the redeveloped sections of the estate, so that navigation within the estate, as in the Barbican estate in London, lacks navigational coherence due to visibility not coinciding with accessibility.



Overlapping view-sheds from the streets surrounding Park Hill into the estate, showing that very few of the courtyards are visible from the outside. (Image courtesy Pises Isarangkool Na Ayudthaya)

It is evident that the estate's ability to create (or recreate) community has been limited by the complicated access from street on the ground to street in the sky. The opportunity to form community ties outside of the estate are far fewer than they were before at least partly due to the fact that the chances of someone passing through the estate by chance are much more limited than would have been the case when the housing was situated on the ground, connected to the wider network of streets. As I have written elsewhere, modern society does not have a correspondence between spatial zones and social identities; communities do not naturally correspond to residential space. Instead, the traditional street layout (such as the one that Park Hill replaced) creates a social fabric that weaves the 'warp and weft' of different social groups together, some who live locally, and others coming from farther afield, passing through the district. [5]

In contrast, complicated arrangements of streets in the sky such as Park Hill make it almost impossible to create the natural mixing of young and old, local and stranger – even before you take account of the relative isolation of the estate from its surroundings (in fact Park Hill is one of the more centrally located of the estates of its era). Thus while the question remains open whether the architectural *design* is attractive, it seems pretty certain that its architectural *configuration* – the relationship of the streets in the sky to the streets of the city – has done little to shape the positive community ties that it set out to achieve.



Park Hill Flats, Sheffield, England. By Womersley, J.L. 1956. Negative number: L39/14 (13) Copyright: © [Courtauld Institute of Art](#). The spatial complexity of the interior is coupled with a dauntingly monumental edifice on the brow of the hill, emphasising its topographical and spatial remoteness.



A peek of Deep Structure featuring [@bartlettSDAC](#)  
[@Humanstudio1](#) [#sheffieldcityarchive](#) and some of the original  
residents of Park Hill Estate. [@S1Artspace](#) until 14th Dec



12 4:08 PM - Oct 17, 2019

[See Ilona Sagar's other Tweets](#)

[1] 'Sheffield Replanned', 1945, quoted in [The Open University, Park Hill, Sheffield: continuity and change](#), via the Municipal Dreams blog <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2013/04/16/the-park-hill-estate-sheffield-streets-in-the-sky/>.

[2] BBC Radio 4 Archive on 4 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b017l87m> programme from 2011, in which Maxwell Hutchinson interviews the architects of the great push to re-build post war Britain

[3] Ravetz, A. (2001). Council Housing and Culture. London, Routledge. See also study commissioned by Sheffield Council in 1972: Darke, R. and J. Darke (1972). "Urban evaluations/4: Sheffield revisited." *Built Environment* (1972-1975) 1(8): 557-561. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43677046>.

[4] Banham, R. (1961). "Park Hill Housing, Sheffield." [Architectural Review](#) 131 (December 1961): 403-410.

[5] Vaughan, L. (2018). [Mapping society: the spatial dimensions of social cartography](#). London, UCL Press, p. 18, quoting Hanson, J. and B. Hillier (1987). "[The Architecture of Community: some new proposals on the social consequences of architectural and planning decisions](#)". *Architecture et Comportement/ Architecture and Behaviour* 3(3): 251-273.

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