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Social Structures

An interview with
Ilona Sagar

An interview with artist Ilona Sagar about the links between people and architecture, health and community, and the process of gentrification.

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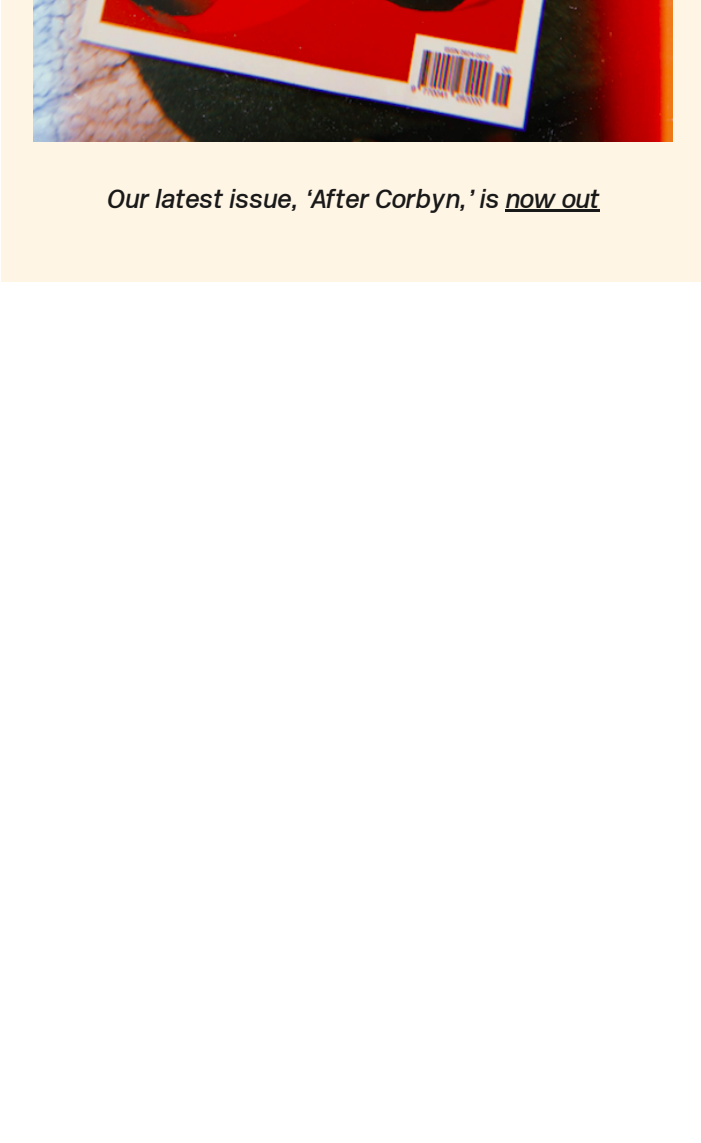
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rtist Ilona Sagar's lyrical, forensic two channel film *Deep Structure* explores the links between people and architecture, data and bodies, health and community, set against the backdrop of Park Hill Estate in Sheffield. Recently shown with an accompanying exhibition at St ArtSpace, a gallery based on the estate, *Deep Structure* was filmed in three main locations: the Hope Cement Works in the Peak District, The Materials Science and Engineering Department at Sheffield University and Park Hill. Designed by by architects Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith and completed in 1961, Park Hill Estate, provided 995 council flats to re-house over 3,000 people from slum clearance areas. Sagar describes it as "one of the UK's most radical and significant post-war housing projects and a testimonial to an era that revolutionised social and residential housing." In 2004 the Estate was bought up by property developers Urban Splash and has been largely privatised since then. Henry Broome spoke to Sagar about how her work takes a different approach to community wellbeing to the the cold, hard political logic of austerity, focusing on the immeasurable, unpredictability of human behaviour and the slippery, bodily qualities of data.

INTERVIEW BY
Henry Broome



How did the exhibition come to be, what was your interest in Park Hill and how does the film approach the subject matter?

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When I was asked by curator Laura Clarke to work on a new commission, it was a completely open invitation. On visiting St ArtSpace, which is at the centre of the Park Hill estate, in its old garages, a quarter of the way through its redevelopment, it was hard to ignore the tensions it presents. It's a complicated, emotive and difficult site in a completely different way to other places I have worked with. I think it's important to skew the hierarchical importance of my eye as an artist - it's easy to lust after ruins and simplify and romanticise the class politics of a site like this. The work attempts to find a bridge between disciplines, a shared, troubled space to encounter the complexities of the site.

A common thread in my practice as a whole is an interest in the social glue that brings us together, whether that is framed by architecture, design, technology or the messy and complex languages of social codes and hierarchies. Recently, I have been exploring the contemporary deadlock between individual and collective notions of wellbeing within the social apparatus of healthcare, considering the role that histories of aspirational experiments in social-planning and radical health reform might play in understanding and rethinking these relationships. I am particularly interested in how the body seems to be a centrifugal force for thinking about these social modes. We cannot speak about bodies without speaking about the complex environments, machines and infrastructure that surrounds them.

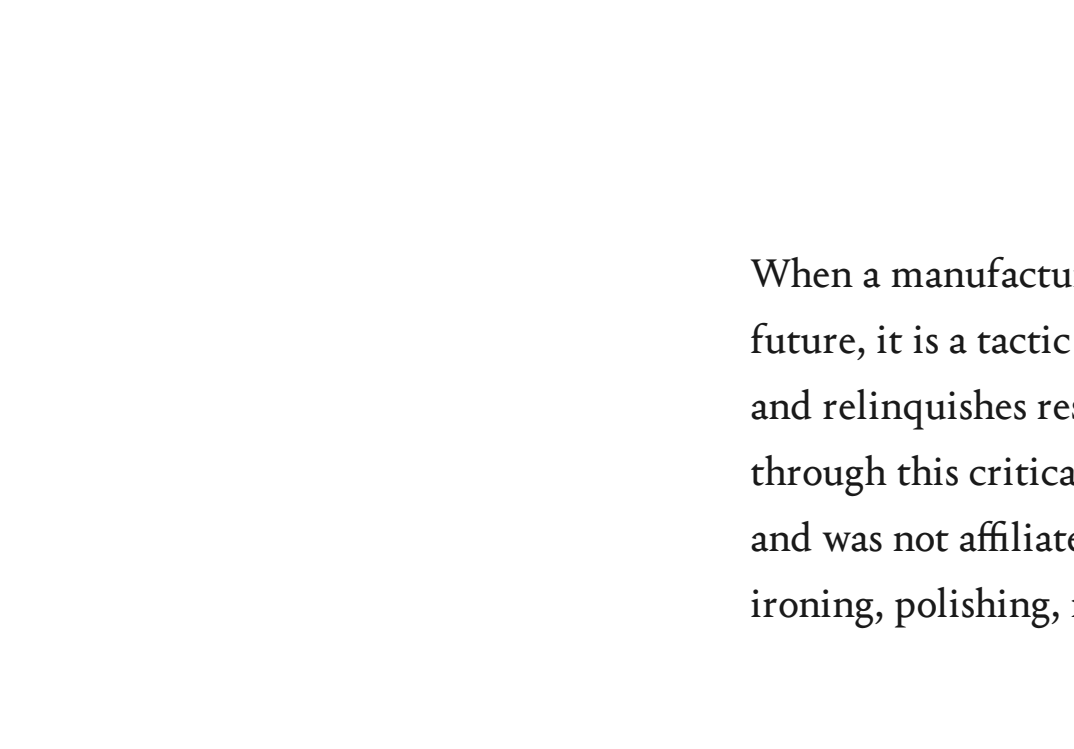
The film examines the heavily contested civic ambitions of architecture through the lens of Park Hill Estate, questioning the ways in which our shared, built environment interacts with concerns of public health, social cohesion and the politics of class.

Towards the end of the film a voice says, "Radical politics isn't a secretion of our brick work, / what spaces are left open for change on a human / scale of unpredictability?", troubling the idea that it's possible to build community wellbeing by simply making houses out of the 'right' stuff, the right concrete. Against this sort of reductive materialism, the film points towards a different, speculative approach to housing which might develop out of a kind of suffusion between building and resident, construction materials and local culture, between the undulating hills around Sheffield depicted in the film and the Hope Cement Works, between concrete and the softness of human bodies. How might the body offer a metaphor to rethink social housing?

HB

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There are several ways in which the body is used as a metaphorical tool, as organs to describe complex geographies such as nations, cities, teams and technical operations. In this way, body parts are delineated domains to categorise, and order - extensions of both state, physical space and civic identity. Le Corbusier calls the house a machine. Eileen Gray, the home a mouth. Frank Lloyd Wright suggests, "To look at the plan of a city is to look at the cross-section of a fibrous tumour." Buildings, cities and bodies are forever entangled. Hope Cement Works, which opened in 1929 and is now the largest material factory in the UK, becomes a complex monolithic space within the film, representing something in-between industrialised networks and natural systems. *Deep Structure* thinks about the factory and the estate as living bodies - machines for health, good and bad - considering the ways bodies and buildings are mapped, archived and translated into data.



This desire to destabilise a linear narrative of Park Hill is in many ways a reaction to where I have seen others seek to simplify it through a rosy-hued nostalgia. Urban Splash, the developers of Park Hill, have used archival images of cheerful housewives and children that uncomfortably turns Park Hill into a safely sanitised, romantic and palatable version of itself. This carefully crafted rebranding of Park Hill includes pop-up souvenir shops, the funding of musical theatre and graffiti artists that smoothly enable a shift of emphasis towards form - a striking collection of shapes, an easily digestible series of kitsch imaginings. A fetishised aesthetic icon of mid-century modernism, divorced from civic function, cloaked under the guise of 'progress' and 'city renewal'.

How has your research into Park Hill highlighted a tendency to conceive of residents in gendered terms and pathologise the working class, particularly women?

HB

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During the initial development period for 'Deep Structure' I spent a lot of time in Sheffield City Archives. There is a wealth of qualitative social data, collected on the people that were intended to move into this way of life, alongside council meeting minute record books. What is distinctly absent is a direct voice, personal accounts. Many of the original correspondences, models, designs and blueprints have been destroyed.

I came across the estate's first occupier, sociologist Joan Demers, who helped residents adapt to this new way of life. I was interested in her in terms of what she represents as a civic character, but also the uncomfortable idea of observing the working class into a managed way of life that was predetermined. Where she exists is in the data she generated. One of the most unusual aspects of Park Hill's design process was the emphasis placed on the residents themselves. The estate's architecture encouraged social interaction and tenants were involved and consulted throughout the design process and initial years of use. Through the construction of a survey, an official distance formed in the categorising of the participants, not purely through their gender, but their gendered role. Rather than 'men' and 'women' the surveys focused on the 'Housewives' and 'Husbands' or 'Housewives without children', with distinct expectations of the types of work they would perform.

The architects of Park Hill, Jack Lynn and Ivor Smith, understood that the new machinic routines pioneered by Fordism and Taylorism aspired for a 'new kind of man': disciplined within a network of industry and less emotionally invested in his labour. A man exhausted by repetitive and structured work who would be cared for and attended to by the labour of his housewife, intensifying the gendered divisions of labour rather than emancipating workers. This industrialised ideology is what in many ways underlies the design intentions of Park Hill Estate. The predetermined rigidity of these survey questions enforced the view of the working class as passive, malleable and their moral and physical betterment a necessary part of a civic infrastructure. Yet, more data does not necessarily mean a deeper understanding of our world resulting in greater freedoms, it becomes the apparatus of different means of power. These are not only historical concerns but translate to a current austerity logic that human nature is infinitely predictable, that it might be possible to have such a great overview of human interrelationships, that it is known what can be cut in order for life to become more efficient.

Deep Structure uses scanning, spatial analysis techniques and archival data sets from Park Hill to unpick the ways in which buildings and bodies are surveilled, both through official-bureaucratic structures and shared social experiences. I worked closely with a combination of actors, original tenants, scientific researchers and factory workers. These characters embody an empathic civic gaze, fluctuating between an empirical observer and affective mediator. In the film, this is conveyed through rhythmic editing and voice-over, influenced by feedback from the application of data and surveying tools across the film's central locations. In the act of encountering these archival datasets, I was thinking about what it means to 'appear' through design or observation, to be 'revealed' in these inhabited spaces. Who's left out of those observations? The slippery and human qualities of data, measuring what is intangible, is what fascinates me.

Common good, like common land, is complex and unstable. The sharing of the public becomes that of the private, the interior narratives we hold close become ones that we perform. How do we understand architecture as the apparatus of neoliberal subjectivity and its claims to notions of public commons and social transformation? The regenerated part of Park Hill now has less than 20% housing association properties, and none are council housing. The exact numbers are not publicly available, and the developers are evasive about releasing figures which would reveal a process of gentrification, involving the further marginalisation of social housing. Sheffield City Council reports the vast majority of properties are privately owned (either owner occupied or privately rented). At the end of March 2018, Sheffield owned 39,559 properties, a fall of 1174 properties within its housing stock since 2013/14. 25,356 are still on the waiting list. We are far from the paternalistic embrace of mid-twentieth century governance. Seventy seven years after the Beveridge report and in the centenary year of the Addison Act we are further than ever before from the founding notions of Social insurance. Amidst global uncertainty and social unrest, the urgent nature of discourse surrounding health, technology and social mobility feels like a pressing subject to understand.

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About the Author

Ilona Sagar lives and works in London. Her projects include 'Living with Buildings', Wellcome Collection, London (2018/2019); 'Self Service' publication and event series, CCA and GOMA, Glasgow as part of Glasgow International (2018); and 'Correspondence O', solo exhibition at South London Gallery, London (2017/2018).

About the Interviewer

Henry Broome is an art critic.