

“The ‘Sunlit Uplands’ Project” ; a paper examining a role for photography in documenting examples of mass social housing

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Abstract

A short paper based on a project, Sunlit Uplands, which uses photography to document the current state of specific examples of the mass social housing, to be found on post-WWII, British council housing estates.

Reflection on the Sunlit Uplands images provides the basis for an examination of the material legacy of post-war mass social housing, which focuses on the significance of myriad small, seemingly unique modifications and embellishments, made over many years to once pristine and uniform structures. The context for this discussion is provided by the ideas of key figures (particularly Humphrey Jennings, Charles Madge and also Tom Harrison) associated with the founding of the pre-WWII Mass Observation movement. The paper draws on the potential of what might be described as Mass Observation’s “surrealist ethnography”, to aid in reconsidering the significance of apparently prosaic modifications made to dwellings by their occupants, and the potential of such practices of habitation, to help ‘recover’ what Paul Ray has described as ‘the imagination that produced the vulgar objects and images of the everyday world’.

The paper also addresses the archive of original photographic documentation, from which the Sunlit Uplands photographs draw their inspiration. The Sunlit Uplands photographs (reminiscent in some respects of the New Topographics “tradition” of landscape photography) in fact derive their distinctive appearance primarily from the aesthetic



conventions, which characterised 1950s and ‘60s photographic records of the architecture, of then newly built British council-housing estates and their attendant state schools and churches. The paper proposes that those original photographs, by heroically delineating the new forms and spaces of the post-war era, embody a particular rheto-

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ric and cumulatively amount to a distinctive vision of a new architectural and social landscape. It is suggested that the contemporary viewer's encounter with such archive images from the immediate post-war period is subject to a complex temporality bound up with the legacy of that rhetoric.

Drawing on Kathleen Raine's evaluation of Mass Observation's legacy, the paper concludes by briefly considering a particular conception of the Sunlit Uplands photographs: suggesting that they lend themselves to a tradition of poetic imagery, 'at once irrational and objective'; 'a listening to the dreaming of a nation, unaware of the purport of its own fantasies'.

