

Notes on the potential of void

The case of the evacuated Heygate estate

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The Heygate estate is stuck, not only in its process of demolition and reconstruction, but also in a timeworn debate confronting its narrated past with the speculative future about to replace it. In the paper, the focus is shifted to the material presence of the place today—as a void in the bustling city. Turned into an overactive filming location, the Heygate's void helped constructing a ruined image of the council estate. Its derelict façades serve today as a valorising background for the shiny new developments that surround it; in the landscape thereby constructed, the estate's failure and its promised solution are told together. However, the Heygate's void is also a place—a suspended, indeterminate one. Rousing us from our accustomed urban experience, voids like the Heygate are propitious places to start thinking and engaging in a transformation of the city, beyond its mere regeneration.

Key words: Regeneration, Void, Architecture, Landscape, Image, Ruin, Present, New

‘Another post-war housing mammoth destined to be wiped out’, one might hastily conclude about the Heygate estate. Completed in 1974, the Heygate consists of 23 various sized, rectilinearly arranged blocks that, altogether, encase 1260 flats. Once home to more than 3000 people, it is today almost completely deserted: only two flats weren't sealed off as of March 2012. The ‘decanting’ of the inhabitants (Southwark Council, 2004) started in 2007, as part of the £1.5 billion regeneration scheme of the Elephant & Castle. Along with the erection, in 2010, of a 148-metre residential skyscraper on the edge of the roundabout,¹ colourful mid-rise condominiums are mushrooming around the area, making the stiff and austere blocks of the Heygate look more and more out of place.

Whoever has been living in London in the past few years can hardly not have heard of the Heygate, considering its insistent appearance in the media. It has become, or was put forward as, a common object of debate.² In one corner, the partisans of its demolition: they insist on the inhuman character of this grey and ugly monster, whose architecture is a mistake of the past, responsible for the crime and social decay that plagued the life on the estate for too long; for them, bringing it down will be an act of social justice and a chance to build a brighter future for the area. In the other corner, the less audible opponents: they denounce the outrage of forcing out a thousand families and scattering them away, or of leaving perfectly sound flats empty for years to finally replace such a substantial stock of social housing with mainly market-price apartments; for them, bringing

the Heygate down will be a deliberate social crime, aiming at clearing the area of its lowest income inhabitants and paving the way for unbridled property speculation. While each side is busy convincing a distracted public that it is right or wrong, the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle goes on, as if impervious to all the chitchat.

The story sounds familiar, even timeworn today—which immediately calls off its chances of mobilising crowds to change the outcome. Told this way, the case of the Heygate gets immediately reabsorbed in the broader historical narrative of the death of council housing in the UK; more precisely, of its premeditated slow liquidation. In the last 30 years, the story has been thoroughly investigated from a wide range of perspectives, either laudatory or scathing, and in the end digested by the majority as one more neoliberal fatality. In fact, the absence of change in the plot narrating its death sustains the collective perception of the council estate as an atavism; and of its burial, as a progress. Thus, the purge of each of the numerous remaining estates can carry on slowly but surely, without encountering much resistance. Such battles themselves have become outmoded.

In order to avoid this trap, it is another story that we will tell here. We won't focus on what the Heygate was, or on what will be built in its place, but on what it is now. We will shift from a macro- to a micro-historical lens, and attempt to reverse a crucial perspective. Even as a temporary side product, the ongoing regeneration has produced something quite remarkable in a city: *a void*. An unoccupied, un-utilised, un-programmed space. What is more, its temporariness is very relative. It took form in the course of the year 2007, and is planned to last until 2015, the year of the announced final demolition of the Heygate's main blocks. Eight years of a void that we will posit as a product, not simply as the result of a subtraction.

Contrary to the stable profiles to be found before and after a transformation, the transient states of urban areas rarely make it into

the grand narrative of a city, and often not even in collective memory. Yet in suspending the commandment of putting to valuable use every square foot of the urban environment, these transient states are moments of radical alterity, and have often made up the ground for the emergence of new spatial, cultural and political practices. We could evoke the *borgate* of Rome in the 1950s, as narrated by Pasolini where, stuck among the ruins of the war and the housing blocks in never-ending construction, a sub-proletarian youth was cultivating its own savage subjectivity, far from all family, church or school (1955). Or again, the long-lasting building site of the *Halles* in Paris, behind the fences of which the pioneers of French Punk and other emerging alternative movements of the 1980s used to gather together, and called that void home (Eudeline, 2003). In both cases, out of the gap that linked two steps of a rectilinear programme, an unexpected diagonal sprang that not only escaped, but also challenged that very programme.

On the other hand, how new is the newness brought forth by urban regenerations? As the very term implies, *re-generating* consists in managing a growth, updating a form, but also reproducing a structure and preventing any fundamental mutation (Massumi, 2002). Today, at least in cities whose extensive growth has reached a turning point, and has become less profitable than an intensive one, architecture's most public role is that of instrument for urban regeneration. Always subordinate to a financial scheme, architects are consulted mainly to actualise the potential profit of an area, by designing the most desirable places to live and consume. As bold and contemporary as those newly built forms might appear, they leave intact, and indeed actively sustain, the structural logics of the neoliberal city: ravenous commodification and relentless expansion of the market. Through the gap opened by the evacuated Heygate estate, the paper seeks to address the following problem: what are the conditions of *transformation* of the city, beyond its mere *regeneration*? In this prospect, ours

is a specific concern: the Heygate estate, as a piece of architecture, is dead; only left is its empty corpse, a delimited void (Figure 1). What is going on in this void? What is at stake in its production and maintenance? What is its relation to the teeming city surrounding it? What is the subversive potential of that void? Moreover, since the appearance of a temporary void tends to be a constant within the pattern of urban regenerations, could we start thinking these voids together: as places from which to question, perhaps reinvent, the inherited axioms of the practice of architecture?

The machine to exhibit

A teenager stabbed to death on the Claydon walkway. A man bottled in the face, then beaten up by a gang in front of the Cheersley terraces. Prostitutes and junkies lining along the garages of the Ashenden block. Several hundred hooligans charging down Deacon Way. Hood-covered youths throwing bricks and Molotovs at riot police, at the foot of the Marston block lit by the flames of burning cars.³

All these scenes have the Heygate for background. Between 2007 and 2010, no less than 76 films—feature-length movies, shorts, documentaries, music videos, advertisements, etc.—were shot in the estate. Unsurprisingly it became a filming location

of choice, with its highly photogenic Brutalist architecture, immediately expressive of a gritty inner-city environment; its enormous vacant space, allowing to stage panoramic views without the interference of residents; and its generous administration, handing cheap licences fast.⁴ With those issued in three years, Southwark Council earned £91,000—a trifle, compared to the advantage gained from such a vast communication plan.

The overproduction of images featuring the Heygate estate, be it in a fictional or documentary context, seems to have two major effects, each related to a distinct agency of the image: as evidence and as mask. First, because of the dominant aesthetics employed and the brutality most often depicted in them, the mass of circulating images of the Heygate have become pieces of evidence, produced in a trial by media. As a late visual postface to *Utopia on Trial* (Coleman, 1985), images of crimes taking place within the estate point to the Heygate's architecture as the true perpetrator of a broader social crime. We spectators are assigned the role of a jury: faced with scenes of ultra-violence shot in realer-than-life mode, we are drawn to find the same old walkways, and the big dark buildings they link, guilty per se. Regardless of various contradicting testimonies by former inhabitants, the image of a 'failed', 'crime-plagued', 'sink estate' gained the status of a fact, thereby reconstructing an artificial past and inscribing it within collective memory. Made possible by the void, the abundant fictionalisation of the Heygate rubs off on its remembered past, and by feedback loop becomes the very motive of its evacuation in the first place.

A second effect of this flow of pictures, related to the very phenomenology of the image, is to dissolve both the specificity and the materiality of the Heygate as a place. Because of the architectural likeness of many estates at first sight, and the repetitive use of established framings when shooting them, the Heygate, when appearing on screen or in the city, is masked behind the generic image of the council estate. And



Figure 1 View from the rooftop of the Claydon block, May 2011

although there are currently some 8 million tenants in social housing in England, 30 years of stigmatisation in political discourse and popular culture has established the council estate as a page already turned in the city's history. The more the Heygate is represented, the more its presence in the city becomes blurred: it is replaced by the abstract yet actively sustained stereotype of a *no-zone*—no law, no hope, no access.⁵ It follows a chain reaction: precisely because it is visibly fading, there seems to be a collective impulse to fix the Heygate in images, to store it in archives—as the innumerable photographs of it online attest. Is it then the multitude of photographers who, consciously or not, re-employ the conventional aesthetics of the council estate, or is it our accustomed eye that now sees it everywhere and cannot go beyond a generic image? Be that as it may, with each new picture or film it is that very image, of a failure destined to vanish, which is regenerated.

The empty estate has become a *machine to exhibit*, a factory of images and imagination. The temporary void is certainly more than a money pit to be quickly capped. Arguably, it has been transformed into a crucial support for the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle. Indeed, what is at the core of such a broad process, if not improving *the image* of the area? It is firstly its new image, and only secondarily its new material conditions, which will attract people and capital from

afar and make this colossal financial operation a success. To reinforce the perception of a change takes a twofold manoeuvre: before producing a new appearance, the accent is made on the former—the spectacle of the finally vanquished monster. Various films shot in the Heygate benefitted from a nation-wide and even international diffusion. It is therefore on a large scale that one should evaluate the effects of the visual exploitation of this void. Beyond the specific regeneration of the Elephant & Castle, what it sustains is a meticulous neoliberal agenda: one bit at a time and as inconspicuously as possible, obliterating the very political project that the council estate still evokes—housing *as a right*. In this perspective, the actors of urban regenerations go well beyond a team of developers and councillors, to include every producer and consumer of this particular kind of *ruined* images.

Speculative landscape

It takes some observation skills to realise that the Heygate is still accessible today: at first sight, every former way in seems barred by dark blue hoardings (Figure 2). A closer look reveals that a few breaches are arranged, so that the last residents may still get to their home, albeit by tortuous paths. Each time a new flat is emptied, it is immediately sealed off—by means of half-inch thick metal plates welded onto every door and window—together with the portion of walkway that was only needed for its access. This way, the circulation in the blocks has been methodically reduced to the strict indispensable minimum. In order to discourage potential climbers, rotating spikes have been installed on cornices. Having already had to deal with squatters who re-occupied emptied flats (Sutherland, 2008), Southwark Council took drastic measures to secure the void in the Heygate: '24 hour live security patrols' and an actively maintained layer of defensive architecture covering the original one.



Figure 2 A typical hoarding encircling the Heygate, May 2011

Yet the argument of the defence against squatters doesn't explain why the whole site of the Heygate, with its vast open space and its hundreds of London Planes, is so carefully concealed behind miles of hoardings. On Southwark Council's website, one can read: 'A planning application was submitted in May 2011 for the erection of a new 3m security fence that will enclose the three vacant Kingshill, Swanborne and Wansey Street blocks' (now erected). And regarding the blocks that are not yet vacant: 'We are still engaging with the few remaining residents across these blocks in order to facilitate a satisfactory move off the estate. Once vacant a planning application will be submitted for the erection of a security fence, similar to that installed around Phase one and two.'⁶

It seems like the diffused intelligence overseeing the regeneration senses the disruptive potential of a void in the city—of a sudden slackening of the norms and control regulating the urban experience—and does its best to keep the curious away. The Heygate shall not be approached, but only seen from the distance. The Heygate shall only appear as a *landscape*.

'Landscape doesn't merely signify or symbolize power relations, it is an instrument of cultural power', writes Mitchell (2002). The 12-storey high, 180-metre long Claydon block, now completely vacant and sealed off, stands right in front of the Elephant & Castle rail station, parallel to the tracks. Between the two, a long hoarding encloses a construction site that, although unrelated to the Heygate's demolition, makes the whole estate look already fenced off. From the elevated platform of the station, one can enjoy a far-reaching view: in the background, the monumental corpse of the Claydon block; in the foreground, a bird's eye view of the construction workers laying the foundations of the new Oakmayne Plaza; and turning one's eyes toward Central London, the unending rise of the Shard over the horizon (Figure 3). Tens of thousands of commuters pass every day by this landscape that indeed, doesn't simply expose how things are, but asserts how things will inescapably

be. Every gap is bridged or capped. The passage from concrete estates to glass towers is framed as a relation of continuity, a smooth transition, a natural and irresistible progress. *There is no alternative*. The past is already gone, the future is already here: just watch it happen—and strive to be part of it. Left to rot for years in such a public setting, the Heygate's corpse is assigned a clear role: to narrate its own defeat and to redirect our gaze towards a more glittering horizon.

Besides, on the official website of the regeneration just like in its temporary 'Consultation Hub', a collection of graphics are displayed that are meant to give artists' impressions of the future constructions on site.⁷ Yet, for the vast majority, they hardly disclose any information about the actual architecture to be built. A cheerful use of colours, children and trees in the foreground, but very few traces of an architectural *project* on which to be consulted. In fact, the first planning submission for the Heygate site—a mere outline master plan—is only scheduled for spring 2012. Apart from the conditions of its financial viability, very little has been drafted yet about the architecture that will replace the Heygate. How peculiar: to execute a place and force out its inhabitants on the basis of its insufferable architecture, five years before proposing a project to replace it. However, this naive good sense is worthless if one is to grasp some basics of property speculation and assess the true value of these gap years. The regeneration of the Elephant & Castle was announced as early as 2004, in a preliminary step. Then in 2007, the core operation occurred: the production of a void. Around it, the empty blocks of the Heygate began to work as a dyke, retaining the pressure of the market, letting it rise on its edges. Property developers and investors started bidding, making the speculative value of a square foot of that void skyrocket. In parallel, another process was to unfold, the ruination of the image of the old Elephant. This way, regardless of the quality in absolute terms of what will be built, its relative value is pushed to its



Figure 3 View from the platform of the Elephant & Castle rail station, June 2011

extreme. Once the market pressure has reached its limit, pull down the dyke, demolish the blocks, inundate the void, let the transactions flow and the profit explode. When pondering this regeneration, one cannot but acknowledge how richer the architectural reflection is in the design of a financial package, than in that of a place.

Speculation is by nature twofold. Around the Heygate, it involves the projection of two symmetrical images: on the one hand, the ruined image of its past; on the other, its inverted reflection, the auspicious image of its future. Out of their potential difference, a current of capitals is generated, which pre-exists the more or less faithful material transformation of the area, and indeed, necessitates a spatial and temporal gap. Exceptionally valuable to the processes of speculation, such gaps are concealed and secured in the city. However, where some only see a gap—the temporary interruption of a pre-figured process that allows its intensification—

others will find a void—the unhistorical locus of unconstrained potentials, a milieu for the new to emerge. To all appearances, the multiplication of urban regenerations has turned the whole city into a speculative landscape that, by its omnipresence, denies the possibility of an alternative transformation of the city. Yet if one were to act in this direction, perhaps could one start by opening breaches in that inhibiting landscape, and intrude into the many voids it screens (Figure 3).

Void as project

As tenuous as they may be, there are still some activities taking place in the Heygate's void. One cannot but mention the resistance of the last residents to their eviction, without which the whole estate would already be fenced off. When wandering there, one can also spot a few *détournements* of the strictly functionalist environment, such as homeless refuges nested

under flights of stairs or youths riding their BMX across walkways and parapets. Besides, sometime in the course of spring 2011, ‘guerilla gardeners’ have started taking over portions of the Heygate’s green space, to grow flowers and small kitchen gardens. A few months later, such actions developed into the ‘Elephant & Castle Urban Forest’ campaign, which promotes the value of the 450 mature trees hidden behind the estate’s slabs, and pushes for their preservation in the design of the regeneration projects.⁸ Today, a loose community of activists, artists, performers or simply curious city-dwellers seems to gravitate around the improbable allotments, under the intrigued gaze of some neighbouring residents walking their dogs in the calm open space.

Notwithstanding these activities, today the essence of the Heygate seems to lay in the absence of any determinate uses, leaving room for their casual invention and transformation. Emptied of its functions and programmed fluxes, a place of truly radical architecture has emerged: a shelter from an urban environment saturated with injunctions, where the mere idea of a place without a programme is either obscured by the ever-maximising exploitation of all available space, or discarded as simply foolish.

The year 2011 has shown again the importance of a place, for diffused claims and endeavours to weave together and gain an agency. Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol and the various sites taken over by the Occupy movements immediately come to mind. For all their swarming with all sorts of presences, I would propose to consider these places too as voids, emerged in the fullness of a city. The notion of void sketched throughout this paper is hardly attached to that of physical vacancy, but gains its political meaning when it materialises the evacuation of an established order of living and thinking. Void as a locus for the reconstruction of subjectivities, where the suspension of inherited determinations calls for the practice of choice. Regardless of their

causes and outcomes, it is perhaps on the level of their *presence*, that a parallel can be traced between the Heygate and some recent rallying sites for political contestation: by rousing us from our accustomed urban and social experience, they form a concrete setting for inventing and experimenting alternatives.

Movements of contestation tend to coalesce and produce voids in the most spectacular locations of a city—where the fullness of a contested order was the most tangible. Yet we saw that cities too produce voids, as a means to regenerate themselves—in which case those are most often concealed. For all their differences, both kinds of void share an essential trait: they are ephemeral places, always on the move, appearing, disappearing and reappearing along the shifting folds of the urban fabric. In fact, they seem to dissolve as soon as they get a *status*—their essence laying in their perpetual *becoming*. At odds with the long temporalities and static horizons in which city planning operates, such voids seem destined to escape architects and urbanists, or to vanish in their hands. Yet, if one were to suspend the categorical imperative stating that architects must *build*, and thinking their role first and foremost as that of creating spatial relations, void itself could become a project of architecture. One that would reactivate the space of the city as an open field of possibilities, not as a frame of options. In the context of an urban condition becoming the definite human condition, and tending towards a regime of smooth yet incessant control, perhaps one of the most urgent tasks for architects is not to design places that are better integrated to the contemporary city, but precisely to discover, invent and invite to its ephemeral voids.

Notes

- 1 Strata SE1; developed by Brookfield Europe, designed by BFLS.

- 2 Between February 2004 and May 2011, 43 articles mentioning the Heygate estate have been published in the following five news media: BBC News, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Financial Times*.
- 3 The scenes mentioned are from *Fallout* (2007, dir. Roy Williams, 75 min); *Harry Brown* (2009, dir. Daniel Barber, 103 min), *Shank* (2010, dir. Mo Ali, 90 min) and *The Bill*, 'Great Power: Part 1' s. 26, ep. 13 (2010, dir. Alex Pillai, 25 min).
- 4 On the homepage of the Southwark Film Office website, one could read: 'Southwark is considered to be the most film-friendly borough in London. We have very short lead in times, helpful Film Officers and great locations' (<http://www.southwarkfilmoffice.co.uk/> [last accessed 1 December 2011; homepage recently changed]). Following complaints from the remaining residents, the Heygate estate was taken off the list of 'Council Estates' available as filming locations. Films and TV shows are nevertheless still shot there occasionally.
- 5 On 2 June 1997, Tony Blair pronounced his first speech as Prime Minister in the Aylesbury estate (South London), in which he announced New Labour's plan to regenerate Britain's inner cities: 'there must not be any no hope areas'.
- 6 http://www.southwark.gov.uk/info/200183/elephant_and_castle/1124/heygate_estate/3/ (last accessed 30 March 2012).
- 7 http://www.elephantandcastle.org.uk/pages/consultation_dialogue/164/elephant_castle.html/ (last accessed 30 March 2012).

- 8 <http://elephantandcastleurbanforest.com/> (last accessed 30 March 2012).

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