

Art in Public at Warwick and Brindley Estate, London

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After the Second World War, large sections of London (among other cities) had to be rebuilt because bombing had destroyed so many neighbourhoods of flats, pubs, shops, schools, and streets. Of course the social relationships among neighbours also had been disrupted, if not ended by death. The London County Council promoted construction of high-rises, also called tower blocks, in order to provide urgently-needed shelter on scarce land for London's inhabitants. This push to build flats in towers "could happen in England because the form of public housing, which made up about half the housing output, could be strongly influenced by one authority, the central government" [Ash, 1980, p. 99].

The introduction of tower blocks, however, has met with cycles of enthusiasm, contempt, and promotion over the last five decades. Post-occupancy evaluation of these towers has varied widely, from those grateful for indoor plumbing, central heating, and more space for their families, to hostility toward cheap concrete construction – "mass housing 'monsters'" – and alienation and fear about the social climate [Ash, 1980, p. 112]. Author Miles Glendinning summarized the mixed reactions to post-war housing design:

"The 'heartland' of post-war social housing was undeniably Western Europe, where the balance of socialism and capitalism was reflected in an intricate mosaic of individualized state policies and solutions, both political and socioarchitectural, that frequently featured dramatic clashes between intellectually high-flown initial aspirations and extreme rejection and/or alienation on the part of inhabitants" [2010, p. 49].

Bureaucrats and artists attempted to address the shifts in building type and arrangement in these new developments through art that connected residents to their new neighbourhoods. In the postwar decades, the diversity of artistic approaches – in scale, material, theme, and setting – was matched by equally diverse responses from viewers, novice and expert alike. The terms ‘Modern’ and ‘British’ “were under question and both revealed(...) a plurality of diverse and even contradictory meanings” [Tickner and Peters Corbett 2012, p. 12]. Margaret Garlake, writing of public art in Britain after World War Two, argued that “the process of physical reconstruction... suggest[ed] ways in which a secular and non-commemorative public art might assume some communal significance... One of the functions of postwar public art was to be the visual, symbolic reinstatement of a sense of community” [1998, p. 213]. Reinstating community after the cataclysm of world war is not easily done, of course, and the results were and are inconclusive. Yet art produced for housing estates under the aegis of the London County Council was informed by the ‘process of physical reconstruction’ as well as by the histories of the sites where reconstruction occurred, as I shall discuss. As Garlake averred above, public art took cues from the actual reconstruction to create ‘communal significance’: in the case of Warwick and Brindley Estate, art in some public spaces used concrete as a sculptural material and referred to local history.



Fig. 1: William Mitchell, *Two Doves*, in memory of Robert Browning, 1961, on the Warwick and Brindley Estate, London

The London County Council recognized the complexity of ‘the public’ (Kierkegaard called the ‘public’ a “monstrous abstraction” in 1962), and acknowledged that no one technique or theme would suit everyone. As Garlake noted: “It is one of the paradoxes of postwar public art that though it was largely determined by modernity and the spirit of a renewed society, it represented the prime meeting ground for modernism and tradition” [1998, p. 215]. The

two artworks discussed here engage with both modernism and tradition in compelling ways, in order to grapple with urban alienation and neighbourhood lore.

This essay examines community spaces on the Warwick and Brindley Estate in London at two points in time – 1961 and 1991 – through works by two artists. I use these two points in time to explore some changes in shared spaces on a housing estate in west London in the last decades of the twentieth century. I do not intend to instrumentalise the art as only contributing to community-building. Rather, the *juxtaposition* of the two works holds my argument: that ‘mixed development’ must recognize and address the social tensions and transformations that accompany high-density urban living. Public art offers one means to name and direct these tensions, while engaging residents’ visual, kinesthetic and haptic perceptions.

In the immediate post-War decades, monumental public art aimed to “provide an imaginative mental mosaic embracing(...) the sense of a city’s history and its relationship with the flux of present activity“ [Garlake 1998, p. 214]. Sculptor William Mitchell’s *Two Doves* (1961) is a concrete and enduring relief that defines a small open space between two rows of terrace houses on the estate and draws on a slice of the city’s history (Fig. 1). Another cast concrete mural by Mitchell was installed in the entrance lobby of Gaydon House, one of the Estate’s tower blocks, and contributed to the concept of a spatially dispersed ‘mosaic,’ where sculpted reliefs added visual variety to the newly – renovated or – built structures.

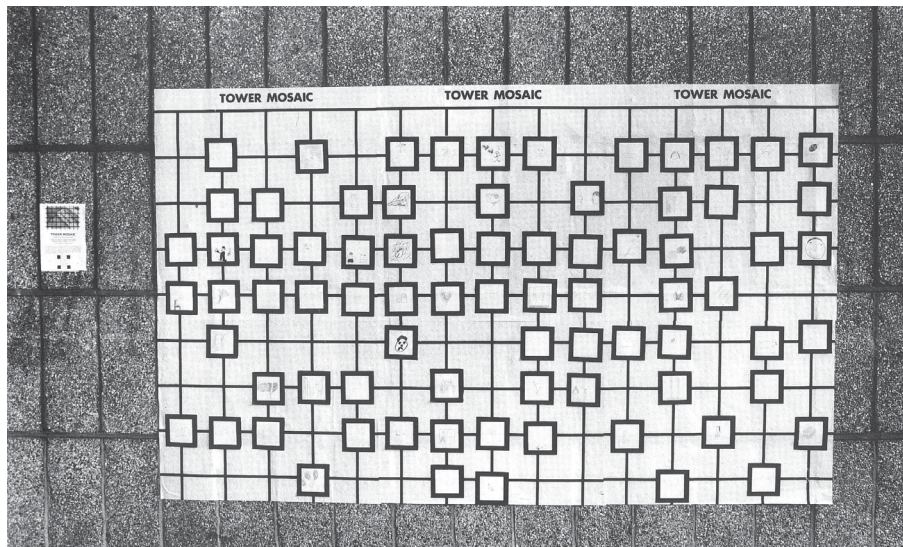


Fig.2: Stephen Willats, *Tower Mosaic*, 1991, displaying drawings in response to problems posed in the *Tower Mosaic Book* after Day 8 of the project, Princethorpe House, Warwick and Brindley Estate, London

Thirty years later, Stephen Willats’ *Tower Mosaic* (1991) was a short-term collaboration with residents in two buildings on the estate, Brinklow and Princethorpe towers. Together with Willats, residents created drawings that then were displayed temporarily on a large paper

grid, or mosaic, on the exterior walls of the towers (Fig. 2). *Tower Mosaic* animated the tall modernist structures from the 1960s with new meanings by appropriating walls and lobbies for creative expression by occupants on the estate. While Willats worked with residents to generate images that were assembled into a collective piece, Mitchell's large relief of abstracted doves demonstrated the commitment to public art on the part of the official bureaucracy. Mitchell's commissioned art was part of regeneration as a "comprehensive and integrated vision" [Imrie, et al. 2009, p. 4] while Willats' art was motivated by the artist's interest in and commitment to self-organised and socially inclusive art-making.

Warwick and Brindley Estate in North Paddington, London, was designed and built by the London County Council (LCC) in the modernist idiom between 1958 and 1962. Sir Hubert Bennett (1909 – 2000) was in charge of the LCC Department of Architecture, having taken over from Lesley Martin in the mid-fifties. The estate includes six 21-story tower blocks, which are clustered in the western half and 23 numbered ranges of low-rise terraces bounded by Paddington train station, the rail lines, and the Grand Union and Regent's Canals (Fig. 3). Under a scheme of 1958 affecting 6,700 residents, the London County Council designated half of the recently-purchased properties in the area to be used for 1,100 dwellings, with a density of about 140 people per acre. The rest of the property was used for shops, garages, schools and other institutions, as well as a canal-side walk and 8.7 acres of badly-needed open space. About a quarter of the extant properties were renovated, while the remainder were war-damaged and required "a full-scale clearance" [Bennett 1960, p. 346]. This area came to be known as the Warwick estate, and soon extended west of Harrow Road over the site of Brindley Street.



Fig. 3: View of Warwick and Brindley Estate, London. Back cover of *Tower Mosaic* documentation booklet, 1992

The Warwick and Brindley estate is a prime example of mixed development, with the six towers and low-rise buildings for families, in addition to an old people's home, a fire station,

and schools. The curving terraces of flats were interspersed with playgrounds, green spaces and abstracted relief sculptures designed by professionals, like *Two Doves* by William Mitchell. As Cleeve Barr wrote in 1958 [Public Authority Housing, p. 35]:

“The mixed development does not mean simply the addition of a few flats in a housing layout(...) It means a balanced development based on a variety of types and sizes of dwelling suited as far as possible to the kinds of families who are going to live in them(...) It implies contrasts in the height and form of buildings, and in the treatment of private and public open space.”

Referred to as total design, mixed development described a process that included “shopping centres, libraries, clubs and community buildings, landscaping, roads and paving, kiosks, street lamps, signs...” [Barr, 1958, p. 50]. This ‘total design’ approach resulted from the ‘comprehensive and integrated vision’ promulgated by the LCC at mid-century.

Political economist Stephen Elkin [1974, p. 41] noted that mixed development not only referred to “visual interest” but also “a cross-section of all classes” that was a goal from the late forties on. Government designers viewed mixed development as a way to counteract the monotony and uniformity of pre-war and early post-war housing. Barr noted as well that “low roofs will be visible from the windows and balconies of taller flats. This creates a new and interesting aesthetic problem...” [1958, p. 37].

The LCC architect Hubert Bennett, who personally designed Warwick Crescent on the estate, had a staff of 3.000 people, with an international cadre of architects. The staff was divided into chief architect and chief administrative officer for each of nine divisions (including schools, housing, fire service, expanded towns, old people’s homes, and colleges. Bennett said that the best architects gravitated toward schools and housing). In an oral history from 1999 at the British Library, Bennett said that once the Warwick site redevelopment plan was approved by Parliament “nothing could stop us from moving as fast as possible.” In 1960, Bennett described the area of central London: “Surrounding the centre is that large belt of obsolete property. The problems of transforming these decaying areas can only be met by comprehensive replanning on a great scale” [p. 342]. “Replanning on a great scale” is what the LCC proceeded to do.

The LCC viewed many of the building projects they sponsored as an appropriate setting for public art. The organization had a significant role in shaping post-war public taste. In May of 1948, for example, the LCC organized its first outdoor sculpture exhibit, which turned out to be very popular as people could wander at leisure among works by many leading artists, including Henry Moore and Auguste Rodin. A decade later, the LCC’s Department of Architecture created the position of design consultant from 1957-1965, which drew from an

in-house group of artists with the Housing Division. These artists worked in tandem with the architectural and construction teams because art was considered part of the total design in the newly-designed mixed developments.

William Mitchell was a design consultant intimately connected to the Warwick and Brindley Estate. He was actually born in Maida Vale, a district now included in the estate, in 1925. A great experimenter in materials and techniques, he worked for the LCC from 1957-1965. For the LCC, Mitchell's charge was to design low-cost work that was fully integrated with new styles and methods. Mitchell viewed his art as a "bridge between the preciousness of art and the mass of people." Mitchell produced 49 works at 27 LCC sites; 19 of the 49 works remain as of 2011. The Twentieth Century Society quoted him in 2011 as saying:

"I wasn't interested in something going on a plinth and people walking around it...The clients are not the architects, they are the rate payers. Often they did not want the ultra-sophisticated, a Warhol bean can or pile of rubbish" [Jervis, et al., p. 16].

Mitchell's *Two Doves* (1961) is a precast concrete relief about 4,5 meters in length and 1,8 meters tall; the textures of the aggregate and the abstracted patterns of the doves' bodies and feathers provide many details to savour. The sculpture is dedicated to the poet Robert Browning, who lived in the area from 1862 to 1887. The wall defines a small open space and also visually links the adjacent buildings through energetic horizontals and diagonals that pull the eyes across the plaza (Fig. 1).

The Leader of the LCC (from 1947 until its abolition in 1965), Sir Isaac Hayward, in 1949 recognized the human dimension of design when he wrote: "The problem is one not merely of bricks and mortar but of flesh and blood, of the personality, customs, hopes, aspirations, and human rights of each individual man, woman and child who needs a home" [Pereira, 2012, p. 57]. How does one create a neighbourhood, acknowledging the "personality, customs, hopes, aspirations, and human rights of each individual man, woman and child"?

Stephen Elkin in his 1974 book *Politics and Land Use Planning* discussed the "low level of interest group organization in the city [of London](...) English political culture appears to be closer to the non-participatory end of the scale than the American variety," he noted. Elkin claimed that "political deference" was a "major strand in British political culture" [pp. 95 – 96]. This strand is something of a vicious cycle, because Elkin also provided evidence that the LCC did very little consultation with residents until after the plans had been finalized [p. 104]. A housing group in 1977 called this cursory consultation "false participation" [A Street Door of Our Own, p. 46]. On the Warwick and Brindley estate, the LCC engaged in 'total design,' in which experts – from social scientists to artists, from architects to engineers –

decided what would create a neighbourhood, reinforcing the political passivity of the would-be estate residents.

Tower blocks are entwined socio-technical systems, where the structures shape the lives of those living there and, in turn, not-so-passive residents alter the structures over time. Curator Brigitte Franzen has noted that

“[t]he architecture formed the context for the living conditions, which made certain actions on the part of the people who lived in them inevitable. Whether it was in the careful decoration of flats, the expressions of graffiti in the hallways or on the outside of buildings...[artist Stephen] Willats observed a special energy... to create self-empowered situations which countered the regulated world of the tower blocks with an alternative world” [2010, p. 97].

While the early sixties were marked by top-down decision-making in government-sponsored housing, ‘user-generated urbanism’ [Parry, 2011, p. 31] emerged in the work of London-based artist Stephen Willats in the next decade, drawing on vernacular intelligence that communities already possessed, and extending “the building site to take into account the local engagement both with materials and with users” [Awan, et al., 2011, pp. 48, 60].

In 1991, Willats joined with residents of the then 30-year-old Warwick and Brindley Estate to create *Tower Mosaic*. (In 1990, Willats had worked with individuals on the estate to make smaller scale works, such as the triptych, *A View over the Balcony*. He often returns to the same locations and works with people he already knows from previous projects.) For *Tower Mosaic*, Willats focused his organizing in two buildings on the estate, Brinklow and Princethorpe towers, inviting six residents to photograph objects in their living spaces, especially those items that “denoted a relationship with someone else,” and discuss the pictures with him [Tower Mosaic 1992, n.p.]. Then Willats used the images and texts from the interviews to make a booklet with queries to which other participants drew their responses. He noted in the project’s documentation: “With the help of the participant I always devise a question; I consider the question as a basic stimulus to interaction between people, and in my work it is addressed specifically to the audience” [2012, p. 29B]. The first problem posed to participants, for example, was to “make a drawing(...) showing how the objects [pictured] might influence how you feel about yourself.” The photographed objects included an upholstered armchair with pillows, a small electric fan, a woven handheld fan, some fuzzy slippers, and a basket of fruit; each item was affixed to a black, uneven polygon and linked to the other items with dark black lines with a pinwheel effect (Fig. 4).

Words from one of the residents who had made the photographs accompanied the images. For the images just described, the text read:

"I spend my whole day inside here now, so I have to adjust again, all my life I've been working, sometimes I'd leave home at half seven, back at nine in the night, and it's like I had to learn my house all over again, because when you work you're too tired to notice certain things. I enjoy looking at my plants. I talk to them, they grow nicely, and then I look around I might see a space, and I say I could buy this and put it there or fit something there. I just like looking at things that I put there."

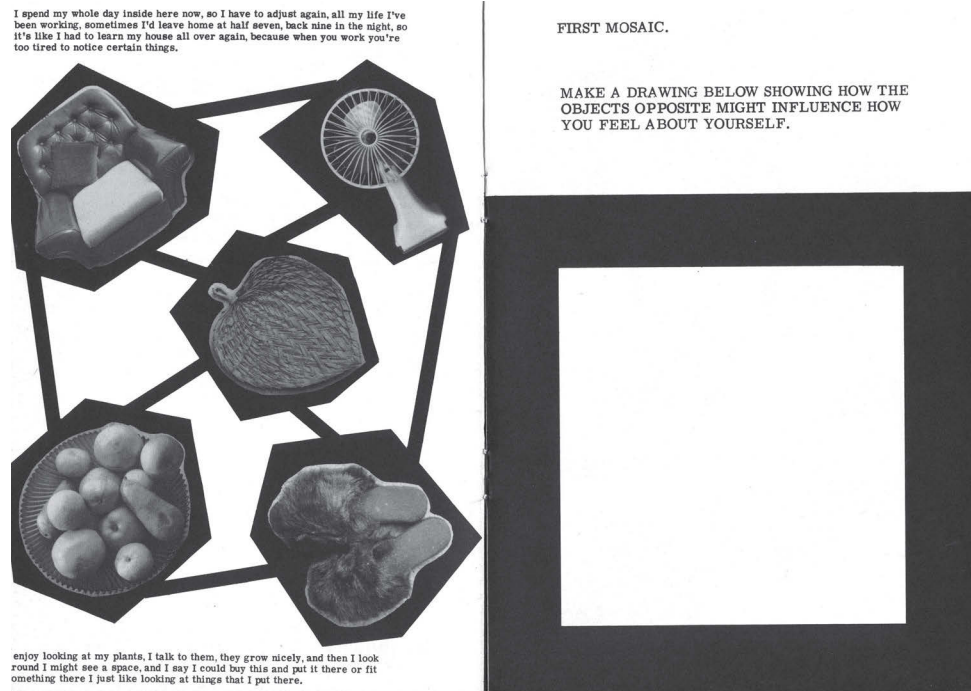


Fig. 4: Stephen Willats, *Tower Mosaic Book*, 1991, Problem posed for First Mosaic. Courtesy of Stephen Willats.

There were three other sets of images with text in the *Tower Mosaic* booklet that led people to consider their relationships with another person, their immediate surrounding community, and the larger world. One commentary accompanying the second prompt in the *Tower Mosaic* book about "your relationship with someone else" captures a resident's frustrated isolation:

"Lots of times I've gone to say hallo to someone that I've spoke to previously and I think, yeah, well we're start saying hallo now and they just walk by and so I think, well, sod you, I am not saying hallo to you again."

Residents were invited by a volunteer to draw on a table in the lobby (Fig. 5). The drawings that were generated by these text-and-image collages over a two-week period (29 April – 12 May, 1991) were then displayed in a mosaic-like manner on gridded paper pasted to the wall of the tower's base. As one might expect, the drawings ranged widely in subject matter and

skill level, from child-like scribbles to a pregnant woman in profile, from a bleeding heart to embracing arms, from a bloodshot eye to a broken world. The display of these drawings on the exterior wall gave people a chance to see the variety of forms and ideas created by their neighbours, altering a common space for a brief time. As Franzen wrote: “[Willats] bundles information, makes it readable and feeds it back into the residential systems” [2010, p. 89].

In 1992, Willats wrote in the *Tower Mosaic* catalog: “... The very fabric of the estate, its physical structure, and the language and experiences of residents was central to the origination of *Tower Mosaic* (...) Brinklow House and Princethorpe House (...) were considered to be part of the work’ [n. p.]. The black-and-white photographs that Willats used as prompts for



Fig. 5: Volunteers were available in the building foyers to invite participation in *Tower Mosaic*, Stephen Willats, 1991. Courtesy of Stephen Willats.

participant drawings were taken in residents’ spaces, of objects chosen by them. The large paper gridded with squares certainly mimicked the concrete panels of the lower storey of the Brinklow tower. Thus “the very fabric of the estate” – a fabric that included the residents and their relationships – was indeed the key aspect of *Tower Mosaic*. While the final product was markedly different, Mitchell’s *Two Doves* was also informed by the materials and context of the estate.

Willats co-created art projects at many estates across England and Scotland and in Berlin from the early 1970s on. Of the settings for these projects, Willats wrote in 1988: “I see modernist housing developments as monumental symbols of planned, modern social thinking which are filled with a casual mosaic of objects and signs that exist in random

displacement with each other, and, sometimes even in overt alienation” [n.p.]. Employing the idea of a mosaic allowed the juxtaposition of various elements so that they “occup[ied] the same space, they are made to coexist, so as to transform psychologically the meaning of that space” [n.p.]. In *Between Buildings and People* [1995], Willats reflected:

“The physicality and inflexibility of the living space’s structural mass means that it is the inhabitants who must adapt as soon as they move in. This feeling of restriction and passivity is strengthened by the rules and regulations that accompany the life within its confines. For the interiors of the housing blocks do not adapt themselves to the inhabitants’ requirements; they cannot influence the planner of their own living spaces, they can only modify its surfaces and position objects within it to state their own identities and values” [p. 25].

In the *Tower Mosaic* text-and-image collages that Willats made with estate residents, it is clear that people modified their modernist surroundings as best they could to make their flat suit their needs. One man quoted in a collage commented: “[P]ossessions as such don’t mean much to me at all, they’re sort of inanimate. There’s nothing to them really except sentimental value.” A woman, on the other hand, used objects to spark her imagination: “I’ve got different kinds of things around just to make it like a fantasy place.” Objects infused living spaces with emotions that otherwise may have been monotonous and overly-controlled. Curator and art centre director Emily Pethick described these collaborations that began with a small number of residents and expanded over time to include more and more people, responding to the initial collages:

“A number of Willats’ participatory works have used multichannel approaches as a way to describe an object, situation or event through time from a number of philosophical perspectives. They use the fabric of the environments that he is working in, which encompasses not only surrounding physical structures and available resources but the behavior of people in particular time and place-specific situations” [2010, p. 111].

While Willats was working in Berlin (1979 – 1980), he “coined the term ‘counter-consciousness,’ which stands for people’s capacity for self-organisation and counter to the officially conveyed political, social or national consciousness and the construction of identity associated with it” [Franzen, p. 93]. Willats’ idea of ‘counter-consciousness’ was manifest in spaces designed by the LCC, for example, supporting the capacities of estate residents to express themselves. Recognizing this, the 1988 *National Tower Blocks Directory* included a two-page insert about Willats because of his collaborative art-making with inhabitants. The editors noted: “...Stephen’s art is our art. By tower block tenants, about tower block tenants and for tower block tenants” [p. 62].

William Mitchell's approach to art-making for the LCC was for tower block and other estate residents, but not by them or about them. Mitchell's *Two Doves* drew on historic associations to the neighbourhood, such as Robert Browning's occupancy as well as the poet's frequent avian imagery. Further, Mitchell's relief has material relationships between his concrete sculpture and the concrete framing of many of the estate structures. Mitchell's sculpture certainly provides visual interest along the canal that it faces. To apply Elkins' concept of 'mixed development' to the artists' uses of public space: A variety of art forms – whether by Mitchell or Willats or some other designer – placed across the estate at different times, appealed (one hopes) to a cross-section of classes and nationalities that are housed on the estate. Mitchell's work might be seen as attempting to link past residents to current ones, and open spaces to adjacent structures; Willats' work aimed to connect the residents themselves through shared creation and exhibition. Contemporary participatory art practices like Willats' layer new meanings onto past structures through spatial and symbolic appropriations by current residents. That Willats created a context to "shape the environment around residents" priorities' helped estate housing remain relevant to the occupants of postwar council flats. *Two Doves*, Mitchell's contribution to mid-century 'total design,' remains a significant part of the estate's 'intricate mosaic' of socioarchitectural solutions that Glendinning, quoted above, described in 2010.

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PICTURE CREDITS

- Fig. 1: William Mitchell, *Two Doves*, in memory of Robert Browning, 1961, on the Warwick and Brindley Estate, London. Cast concrete. Photo: Sharon Irish
- Fig. 2: Stephen Willats, *Tower Mosaic*, 1991, displaying drawings in response to problems posed in the *Tower Mosaic Book* after Day 8 of the project, Princethorpe House, Warwick and Brindley Estate, London. Photo: Stephen Willats.
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- Fig. 4: Stephen Willats, *Tower Mosaic Book*, 1991, Problem posed for First Mosaic. Photo: Stephen Willats.
- Fig. 5: Volunteers were available in the building foyers to invite participation in *Tower Mosaic*, Stephen Willats, 1991. Photo: Stephen Willats.

