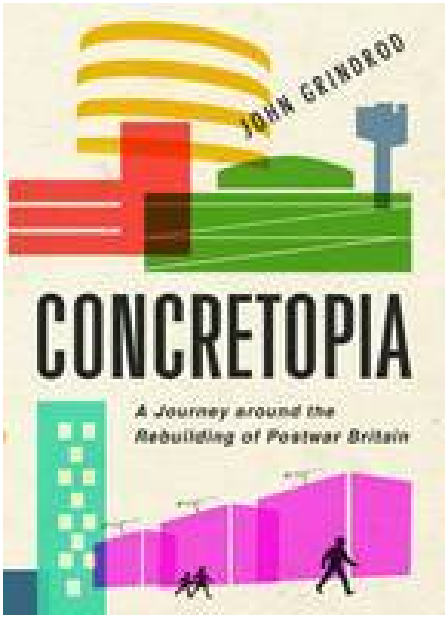

Concretopia: A Journey Around the Rebuilding of Postwar Britain

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TOWER BLOCKS. FLYOVERS. STREETS IN THE SKY. ONCE, THIS WAS THE FUTURE. Was Britain's postwar rebuilding the height of midcentury chic or the concrete embodiment of Crap Towns? John Grindrod decided to find out how blitzed, slum-ridden and crumbling 'austerity Britain' became, in a few short years, a space-age world of concrete, steel and glass. On his journey he visits the sleepy Norfolk birthplace of Brutalism, the once-Blitzed city centre of Plymouth, the futuristic New Town of Cumbernauld, Sheffield's innovative streets in the sky, the foundations of the BT tower, and the brave 1950s experiments in the Gorbals. Along the way he meets New Town pioneers, tower block builders, Barbican architects, old retainers of Coventry Cathedral, proud prefab dwellers and sixties town planners: people who lived through a time of phenomenal change and excitement. What he finds is a story of dazzling space-age optimism, ingenuity and helipads -- so many helipads -- tempered by protests, deadly collapses and scandals that shook the government. Concretopia is an accessible, warm and revealing social history of an aspect of Britain often ignored, insulted and misunderstood. It will change the way you look at Arndale Centres, tower blocks and concrete forever.

Concretopia: A Journey Around the Rebuilding of Postwar Britain Details

Date	:	Published November 12th 2013 by OId Street Publishing (first published November 1st 2013)
ISBN	:	9781906964900
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From Reader Review Concretopia: A Journey Around the Rebuilding of Postwar Britain for online ebook

Nick Lincoln says

Well written, with a nice, fluid style. Which is good, as this is perhaps not, on paper, the most riveting of subject matter.

While it is very easy to castigate the town planners of the 1950s-1970s, Grindrod's book reminds us just how desperate this country was for new housing in the decades following WWII. Having said that, it doesn't excuse the corruption of John Paulson, T. Dan Smith et al, the ghastliness of most of the architecture ("*Brutalism*" - says it all) and just how many ideas of those times have long since fallen by the wayside.

A striking insight for me was just how little the early planners cared or took into consideration the concerns of the actual people to live in their creations. This changed over time but the damage was done for thousands.

Grindrod's views are, I think, informed from a "*central-planning can be good*", left-leaning perspective. Late in the book he mentions the current decline of the welfare state thanks to austerity measures, for example. He is also more fond of concrete than perhaps most!

Regardless, an informative, interesting book on a very tumultuous time in our architectural history. Well worth a read. And as a Hertfordshire resident, it was illuminating to learn how many of the post-War architectural influencers experimented in God's county. Stevenage, for example, ...

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arjuna says

Thoroughly enjoyable, well told and - very clearly - enthusiastically researched romp through the modernist/brutalist rebuilding of Britain - absolutely delightful, something to be savoured. I'd have loved more (and clearer) photographs of all those beautiful "concrete monstrosities", but that's a very minor criticism and there's more than enough info there for one to follow up and research independently. Not comprehensive by any means, but that's hardly unexpected when the subject itself is so vast... most valuable for its insight into all those *good intentions*, for its portrait of a time in which public policy was indeed driven by wanting the best for the citizen (however idiosyncratic or patriarchal any one group's idea of what "best" was might have been) - a time of enthusiastic and exploratory public commitment to serving the collective human good. Great fun, definitely whets the appetite for more, and Grindrod's love for his subject shines through constantly, making it an absolute pleasure to read.

Jo Coleman says

A lovely read which I carried around for months. I found all the descriptions of new towns and council estates being carefully planned out for people who actually liked living in them to be immensely soothing. Maybe this book is best read in tandem with 'Estates' by Lynsey Hanley who explains how things didn't work out in a lot of places. But it made me look up videos of Cumbernauld, gave me a new-found respect for Welwyn Garden City and Milton Keynes, and it even had a good stab at trying to explain Croydon.

Gareth Evans says

Between the end of the war and the mid 1970s some very 'interesting' buildings appeared in Britain. As Grindrod points out these are often derided as concrete monstrosities, but the story of their development and their relationship with the people who lived and worked in them is fascinating. This book could have been fearsomely dry, but Grindrod is a affable guide, reporting on his own experience and research. The result is an easy, mildly amusing read which avoids dodgy puns (favoured by some writers of this style of literature) or too much technical detail about shuttering concrete or creating glass walls. It's an excellent, light social history and will appeal to readers of Douglas Kynaston. Marvellous, one of my books of the year.

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the gift says

051214:there are a few notes about this high rating: this book is not a five for everyone, only those of us interested in residential architecture, in city planning, in the way this was expressed in post-world war two Britain. this is a long book, covering many of the structures, plans, dreams, failures, in response to the great need for housing, for slum clearance, and the collision of utopian plans and architecture, with the world of politics, the world of actual people, that was often disregarded by professionals. i am not british, i have never lived, or even visited the estates, the old garden cities, the new towns, the cities that have survived or fallen or surpassed original utopian planning of the era. i know of them in many cases only by websites like http://www.modernistestates.com/archive or http://www.utopialondon.com/kate-maci... or http://www.thewookie.co.uk/skyscraper... and of course this: http://modernarchitecturelondon.com/p..., but visiting in a book or website, these are infinitely interesting to an architecture geek like me. once i wanted to be an architect, and i think it is a natural progression of interests with furniture- what you want inside- and urban planning- what you want as setting- so this was a five book for me...

Sitatunga says

My father worked for Chamberlin Powell & Bon and the LCC before heading abroad. Coming back to England in the early 70s, moving into a Bryant semi in Newport Pagnell, as Milton Keynes was wrested from the clay soil of the Ouse Valley - driving along the last remaining country lanes in our mustard gold Marina with shiny olive green plastic seats; travelling to school on British Rail's olive-green artificial fibre seats in the clear-varnished plywood coaches, then DIY-ing our own plywood bedrooms with Habitat self-assembly furniture (orange cushions) - and attending uni in Rik Mayall's bombed-out Manchester; on holiday, driving through Cumbernauld, Harlow, Welwyn .... .. all these and a thousand other memories are stirred by Grindrod's odyssey through the concrete and prefab hangover that was the 70s and the apocalyptic 80s that followed - mixing nostalgia - for what was and the future that was then imagined - with horror at the sheer shabbiness and grimness - which is the story of that frightening - exciting, numbing, discombobulating - era. Grindrod is fairly upbeat by the end of the book and indeed, the mood is now everywhere changing. One of my father's colleagues looked at the Barbican as a possible retirement pad before settling on Frinton-on-Sea. A good number of people now view the destruction of the 'Incinerator' (the Royal Arbiter of Taste's epithet for Birmingham Central Library - where I used to work) with mixed feelings while Milton Keynes is, the jokes notwithstanding, an overall success.

Ade says

Endlessly fascinating and absorbing

Perhaps regrettably a little short on the afterlife and downsides to these brutalist monuments, although one could argue that such material has been well covered elsewhere. One point in favour of the Kindle edition: the photography shines.

Jennifer says

This was in greater depth than I had imagined, almost a textbook, and less travel writing. I enjoyed the range of topics Grindrod delves into revealing the complexities of the planning process: the corruption scandals involving Poulson and T. Dan Smith being merely one. It is weird to hear buildings and developments typically now derided described in glowing architectural terms. I was surprised more time was not given to issues around build quality and environmental shortcomings such as windows, and to maintenance. Grindrod is a lover of concrete which he seems to see as a noble product of the earth: sand and rock he says, and some of the descriptions of pouring concrete meshed wonderfully with the film Locke.

I would have appreciated more and much, much better reproduced photographs. In places too he is too journalistic in his style: he interviews some fascinating people but given the tone of the rest of the book the description of their hair colour and the kind of biscuits they offer him seems out of place and occasionally appears patronising. He only just seems to avoid putting the age of each in brackets or commas after the name.

James says

Made me want to visit Croydon.

John Houghton says

A decent introduction to the story of post-war housing in Britain.

The story is well-told, and the pace is maintained, although the analysis is fairly shallow and too many chapter rely on baggy anecdotes and over-long quotes from eyewitnesses and other sources.

There are few connecting themes between the chapter. At the start, the author positions Croydon as a test-bed for the various waves of policy experimentation and architectural folly. Yet the place disappears until the end.

I also struggled with the tonal disparity between the profound flaws of post-war housing policy - the total disregard for existing communities, the lack of tenant voice, the corruption and machismo arrogance - and

the author's apparent misty-eyed nostalgia for these imagined good old days.

A decent scene-setter that should inspire readers to engage with more critical and searching histories of the period.

Kriegslok says

John Grindrod has written an epic fast moving book that turns what may seem like a fairly dry subject into something akin to a fast moving thriller. It has all the essential ingredients except perhaps blatant premeditated murder.Taking as a starting point the ideas and ideals that inspired the "Garden City" or town with its open green spaces and Arts and Craft housing he looks at how the problem of housing, as it became an major issue for public planning developed over the decades. The problem of overcrowding in run down slums exacerbated by the destruction wrought by WWII demanded a national response. While the carpet bombing of areas desperate for renovation and redevelopment was in many ways the "architects dream" this was tempered by a dire crisis in resources both financial and monetary as well as the scale of the problem. Grindrod tells the story of how in the face of insurmountable odds the challenge of rehousing Britain was tackled and met, both the successes and the failures and the opportunities opened up for innovative and revolutionary solutions, from the miracle of the immediate post war to the assembly line prefab tower blocks of the 1960s. The battle for resources, the new building techniques demanded by architectural innovation, the lack of skilled labour and the needs and wishes of both potential residents and those in power is all examined. Inevitably where there is need and money, especially state money so corruption rears its head and towards the end of the book there is a fascinating account of the web of bribery and corruption which emerged in from the architects drawing board, thought planner, to developers and right into the upper echelons of the state and government. As the title suggests there is a good deal about concrete in this book although it is by no means simply a treatise on Brutalism, rather is fits Brutalism in its concrete form into the wider picture. Grindrod goes into detail on some of the more classic and iconic developments (including the timeless Post Office Tower - "a relic of an age when the state invested in industry and technology, a symbol of a lost vision of the future") and looks at why some succeeded, some failed and others never got off the drawing board. In many cases resources it seems crippled promising projects - the most successful being those like the South Bank arts complex and Barbican complex in London which were funded fully. Another key issue which comes up and is perhaps in the minds of many who remember the 19709s and 1980s is the gradual neglect and under Thacherism deliberate running down of public services and facilities. Grindrod has interviewed former caretakers of developments who recall the effect that cuts had on struggling estates, especially when the traditional industries were decimated and unemployment was allowed to spiral out of control and how estates became dumping grounds doomed to dereliction, vandalism and crime. Recent efforts to remedy this by reintroducing security and maintenance, albeit having privatised formerly public assets, shows how much this deliberate neglect contributed to the social collapse and often the demolition of entire developments barely a couple of decades old. Also considered is the changing relationship between the policy makers and planners and the public - especially in the light of essentially forced moves, the failures of structures and corruption that was revealed over the years - with the shock of public resistance in the face of "a generation of officials used to proceeding with their plans regardless of public opinion, in the unquestioned belief that they were right". This is a gripping and fascinating read that should appeal to a wider audience than those like me who wear a concrete anorak!

Flan says

Didn't really focus on architecture as much as architects. Full of boring anecdotes and testimonials but severely lacking pictures or descriptions of architectural styles referenced thoghout the book (unless I drifted past that bit). For example I can't remember any detailed descriptions of Modernism, Corbusianism or even brutalism. For a book so dependant on these Ideas, no amount of explaing and builing up these concepts in the readers mind with context would have been too much, yet I remember very little.

Should have been half the length with an accessible intruduction to brutalism (with pictures!!!!), architects names mentioned only briefly, and no (ok maybe 1 or 2) testimonials from residents.

Helen says

I enjoyed this very much. I'm probably less of a fan of the concrete stuff than the author is - it really doesn't look all that nice, and also I work in a mid 1970s concrete building which, while it has nice clean lines and everything, occasionally leaks spectacularly in unexpected places as the water seems to travel around in the concrete before unleashing itself without warning when it is no longer raining. Having said that, the whole planning concept is interesting - today it seems to be a matter of quickly selling off publicly owned land for a developer to put whatever is flavour of the month on it (student accommodation at the moment) with no thought of long term requirements or the community around the development, whereas there was some vision and serious thought behind some of the 1950s and 1960s developments. I realise I had a window into all this as a child, as my father was a geographer with an interest in planning and retail location: I doubt whether many of my friends would have spent an afternoon of a Scottish holiday going round Cumbernauld in 1972, as I did, and I also still have the map given to us by the lady at the Milton Keynes Development Corporation in ca.1974 when we went on a guided tour (most of the present town was not yet built, and the bit I remember from that trip is the bit which apparently hasn't aged too well). This is a really good readable guide to what happened in post-war Britain, what has stood the test of time and what hasn't, and the human aspect of that (what it was like to live in the tower blocks, &c.). Highly recommended.

Alex Sarll says

One of the back cover blurbs describes this as like eavesdropping on a conversation between Betjeman, Meades and Ballard. That’s balls, obviously; any such conversation would either rapidly detour away from architecture and end up as eg an exchange of filthy limericks, or else it would be an ill-tempered and waspish business. Whereas Grindrod is consistently genial – to the extent that early on, there are times one worries one may have fallen among Maconies. This is unfair; Grindrod may be a polite guide, but rather than reheating platitudes he’s making a firm yet never fundamentalist case for the architecture of post-war Britain. There’s a split to which the book keeps returning in the old London County Council’s architects and planners, between ‘hard’ modernism, in thrall to le Corbusier, and a ‘soft’ faction who looked more to Scandinavia. And if Meades is hard, Grindrod is definitely soft, but not soft in the head. To encapsulate the sensibility in one detail: an aside lets slip that he’s a St Etienne fan.

The story is to some extent a familiar one, but seldom in this detail or with this laudable balance. Grindrod gets into all the nitty gritty which tends to get left out when the Betjeman wing are in full flow, reminding us just how bad much of Britain’s surviving housing stock was after the War, and quite how fucked the roads

were. He keeps an eye throughout on the level of rents, and the impact that had. He finds people who lived in even the most widely traduced new estates, such as those Gorbals monoliths, and loved them; even in the disastrous Ronan Point, about which who could avoid being accusatory, some residents at the time of the explosive collapse were happy to move back in once it was fixed up. But at the same time, he doesn't try to deny that mistakes were made. Some were the unavoidable consequence of operating at the cutting edge; you're not necessarily going to guess that the window seals fine on the first floor won't do at all on the 31st. Others are less so: what kind of idiot builds a shopping centre in Cumbernauld, on a hill in Scotland, and leaves it open to the elements? Beyond that there's the bigger picture, of humane and visionary architects, initially still running on the can-do energy which won the War, trying to build homes fit for heroes (a phrase puzzlingly absent from the text). But they must steer a middle path between the unduly grand schemes on one side, which place architectural purity above anything so tedious as 'inhabitants' or 'actually, we'd prefer not to demolish the whole of central London', and on the other that most mundane and pernicious foe, greed. Councils smile and nod at plans which include green space and fine amenities, then decide that actually they'd like more bums on seats well within their constituency, thanks, so down comes that wood and up goes an infill block. Croydon gets into a pissing contest with Birmingham over who has the most car-parks, for pity's sake. Private developers want to pile it high, sell it cheap, and get around the limits placed on development (though not yet with the same dismal ease as they nowadays evade Section 106 'obligations' – there's a real air-punching moment where one venal git gets told that if sticking to the rules means the development will no longer be commercial, then so be it - it'll just have to be uncommercial). The caretakers and general TLC these buildings need start to look like easy line items to strike through when some pennies need saving. And that's simple cheese-paring, before we get into outright corruption in some of the later chapters. Again and again, the buildings are let down; sometimes it's in big ways (Milton Keynes' missing monorail, or the running joke about helipads), more often the ship being spoiled for a ha'porth of tar. And of course, on one level we must be a little grateful; imagine if there had been the drive and funds to push through, say, the deranged plan to level Covent Garden. Or to back up this seventies Sunderland planner: *"All houses built before 1914 can and ought to be cleared in the next 10 years. We ought to have plastic houses that we can throw away after 20 years. Good God! We will be on the moon in 2000 and these houses were built when Charles Dickens was writing his novels."*

Still, for all that we might wish the pendulum between innovation and preservation didn't make such erratic swings, for all that these projects were sold short and cut back and blown up, these are buildings whose firm lines I knew from the breezy illustrations in the pages of my Ladybirds and Children's Encyclopaedia as I first learned about the world. So, like Grindrod, I see in them as much continuity as newness and strangeness; they're part of my mental Britain just as surely as the castles and the cottages are. I bought my copy of *Concretopia* earlier this year, precisely because I found it for sale in one of the grand enterprises it extols, the Barbican. Just as appropriately, the book's epilogue - a lovely closing elegy for a more optimistic time – was written there too, in 2013. The extra spoonful of sadness, of course, is that now even 2013 – Hell, even early 2016 – seems like a lost and more optimistic time.

Schopflin says

This is a delight! Beautifully written, funny and demonstrative of so much research. Grindrod is both honest and affectionate about the modernist buildings of the post-war era in Britain. He recognises their flaws as well as celebrating what they aimed to achieve, and sometimes did. This should have been a prizewinner, I don't know why it wasn't.
