

Front to Rear: Architecture and Planning during World War II

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Gimme shelter: Destruction and Reconstruction Landscapes from the Tecton's Air Raid Precautions Plan for Finsbury Borough

In March 1939, a small-scale exhibition showing the borough's Air-Raid Precautions policy opened at Finsbury, London. The show exhibited and publicized a scheme for heavily protected underground shelters, commissioned to Tecton architects, assisted by engineer Ove Arup. Far later, after the publication of *Reichsverband der Deutschen Industrie, Instructions pratiques sur la défense passive* and illustrated proposal on air-war Le Corbusier's *The Radiant City*, the exhibition produced a wide impression on the British public and enlarged the debate on architecture of shelters in Great Britain. Soon after, The Architectural Press published an enlarged version of Tecton-Arup's scheme for Finsbury, titled *Planned ARP*. Martin Pawley, John Allen, Keith Mallory and Arvid Ottar had demonstrated how much the scheme is a key experience about air-raid passive defense, refuge architecture and construction strategies for urban structures during WWII. This paper will attempt to show that, as part of Berthold Lubetkin's design activity for a larger program of social building and regeneration in the borough of Finsbury, the shelters project not only reflected a deep engagement in the reform of architecture towards a "modernist" construction attitude to war, but is also an unique case study to understand mutations in architecture from peace to war time, and from war to peace time again. If the adaptation of social and urban survey's methods to decide the size of the shelters and to planning their suitable locations illustrate the redirection of techniques towards military logistics, the spiral ramped accommodation in the shelters, designed to convert to car-parking use in peacetime, proves a practice of war-architecture as "not a small-term response to extraordinary events but permanent investments in urban infrastructure". At another level, before the anxious depiction of a scared humanity in London subway by Henry Moore became an icon of human experience at "the age of mechanical" war, the didactic attitude of Gordon Cullen's diagrams--at that time working as free lance illustrator for Tecton--seems to communicate all the reassuring qualities of modern construction face to the war. Powerful imagery of the results of building fabric collapse due to high explosive bombs produced by Cullen don't remove the danger, but send its solution not to a individual, traditional domestic landscape, or to "a shelter which people could use in their own homes", as proposed by the Home Ministry. They dialog with the light, progressive and fluid constructions of collective "heavily protected shelters", and offer "protection of civilian population rather than mere accommodation". In this sense the representation of a destruction-scape has its double not only in the safety and quiet gestures of plastic human figures that live the cutaway models of Tecton, but also in a horizon of community in which the collective value (and living) of buildings during

war give sense to design. It argues for a future of planned reconstructed-scapes that counterattacks the dispersal of population in the countryside proposed by a scarcely present Government and announce the disaster of Subtopia of the after-war period.

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