

SOMETHING MUST GO!

a small manifesto or the story so far of my project for the Gorbals

SOMETHING MUST GO!.../1

If you listen hard enough, you can hear this slogan in the Gorbals everyday on a regular basis, as if a muezzin chant would remind you of the spell cast on this patch of land.

So much happened on this soil, that if rubble has a memory, then we should be feeling weary for the foundations of the buildings we are about to erect.

This overwhelming sense of social wrong-doing which runs through so much of our most recent history -the 20th Century- seems to be particularly strong in the Gorbals.

This is a perfect case study for 21st century planners, social historians, architects and anyone with a slightly perverse penchant for urban decay (artists?).

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And so much has gone already....

Throughout the past century, one sweeping change very quickly replaced the previous one just to prove itself destined to collapse once more.

Ill-fated good intentions? Ruthless planning from the start? A blind crusade against slums?

There is all of this and much more in this story...

One is helpless in feeling a sense of unarrestable pace, of urgency and determination at any given point in the history of the Gorbals.

Always seen as a problem, always dealt with as a wound. Swept away, as changing scenes in a theatre production, one face of the Gorbals gave way to another, accepting its destiny, picking up its pieces, or simply moving out of it.

This present one is just the latest round of a seemingly unstoppable changing mood in urban planning, social policies, architectural fashions. Is this just a training ground for the Council urban politics?

"A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth open, his wings are spread.

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.

But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings that he can no longer close them.

This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

This storm is what we call progress."

(Walter Benjamin – Illuminations)

At times, I personally have a lot of sympathy for that angel; too often we face urban situations where we are confronted with the remains of these 'storms'. Too often also, we have to inherit their legacy. And far too often, the same authorities which propelled these drastic actions are then seen quickly covering their tracks, diverting their policies into new areas, with the same unflinching zeal as before.....just the wind has changed direction.

The pile of debris stands now in front of us, in the Gorbals, ready to be transformed again into new scintillating examples of how, in this day and age, we are so much wiser and capable.

The exorcising mission against the spell seemingly cast on the Gorbals has a winning team to prove its point and perform its magic.

Look ahead and you see a totally new Gorbals.

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Away from unjustified sentimentalism, I am not naturally prone to think of the past as better than what it is going to come. This outpour is not about being backwards-thinking or die-harder. Apart from the obvious fact that no one can really tell, the point I am making is not a qualitative one.

The point is, that all the debris we are generating now, whether we like it or not, functions like a bleaching agent for history, that is, from this point onwards, all is turned to people's memories and the books of historians.

For, not even the media's archives can be trusted. Newsreel footage from TV channels, aside from worldwide issues, has an extremely short shelf life. Digital tapes are wiped off in no time.

During researches for a recent project in Barking concerning another cluster of 'problems' tower blocks build in 1967 by Bison Concrete Products, I found impossible to source in the Borough's archive any documentation on the towers, its designers, copies of planning application and so on.

This is the same Borough who commissioned the housing project in those years, making it at one point the largest housing estate in Britain.

Once contacted, Bison Concrete Products (which stopped long time ago producing anything similar to the precast blocks which still litter the suburbia of every respectable English town) did not have anymore data on the towers, passing the bucket back to the Borough.

'Why should we?' I was asked, 'Is there anything special about this building?'

Of course my answer was no, nothing was special about that building, apart from the fact that 34 years on from its construction, some 500 people were lodged in it, trying to cope with its design faults and perverse spaces.

This kind of history blackout is part of our heritage as today's citizens. It works like a selective sieve, which seems to filter out all it wants us to forget, by reducing it into smithereens or hiding from sight. Hence the ritualistic aspect of high rise blowdown, which in the Gorbals even asked for an incidental victim in the person of Helen Tinney, an active member of the community who died of blunt force trauma during the demolition of Sir Basil Spence's QES blocks.

Far from being a backwards attitude, this is a preoccupation I am encountering very strongly in this project more than any other I have worked on before.

Faced with the 'storm of progress' taking another turn, witnessing now the latest transformation happening in the Gorbals, I feel like being looked at from the point of view of those making their first visit in the Gorbals not next year, but in the year 2010, 2020 and as long as the present scheme will last.

I feel like I want to leave to somebody else to duty of making a piece of work which focuses on the idea of making the Gorbals a good place to live for the newcomers. Everything else in the project will anyhow look after that aspect of this venture. The stunning new buildings I have seen the design for, will impact so radically on the environment, that one would be at odd to recognise even the past street layout.

Of course, there is still the problem of the smell from the brewery, but.....

What I feel is more important is to do what no other party involved in this venture will do, simply for their political position in this venture:

- to seize the opportunity of stopping the angel of history from being swept away once again and all the debris growing skyward without ever coming back, to come back to the earlier quote of W. Benjamin.

In other words, to make this artwork a bypass between the legacy of what has been and the hope of what will be.

I am going to make the best to live up to this statement.

This is the time for an open-ended burial ceremony. THIS IS GORBALS YEAR ZERO.

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However good-willed our intention might be at this moment, we can't forget so bluntly how the good intentions of the past have twice turned into rubble in the past 40 years.

It is not suspicion. It is an awareness that no matter how advance we seems to be in our politics, we have to be alert on possibility that the powers we have delegated to other people to administer certain aspect of our public life can ultimately be used against our own interests.

And let's foray then into this past of good intentions for a while...

In Glasgow in particular, the case of David Gibson comes to mind.

Here we have a man who came from the slums, a marxist-socialist unit then even too leftist to make it into the higher ranks of the council, which became in the early sixties the major force of the spawning of high rises all around the town's belt which is now one of the symbols of Glasgow.

Because of his origins and his belief, he was determined to see his own people out of the tenement slums at every cost. However, at the times, planning permissions were strongly controlled by regulations on maximum building height dictated by Westminster rules, still strongly influenced by the Garden City dictum of Lewis Mumford.

This, apart from being a blow on self-regulatory Scottish pride, was stopping most of proposed high rise projects, whilst London at the same time was seeing built and praised some of its most classic example of Corbusian legacy in several housing project which now, still standing, are the stuff of modernist textbooks for architectural students.

However, a particularly powerful recipe was quickly brewing of which the ingredients were:

1- the undeniable need for accommodations in Glasgow due to the population growth, adding on the widespread belief at the time, that population growth would be a constant factor in future times.

At the end of the sixties, some people already started to question the real need for such high housing stock output. Fast forward to now, we see that the biggest assets for Local Authorities is the sell-out of properties to developers.

2- the feeling that somehow, ideologically, high rises would signify a quasi-revolutionary concept even in political terms; in other words, height would take a socially elevating quality for those inhabiting the new building and a feeling of being part of a brand new world, leaving behind all the smoky, dirty, overcrowded pre-war world.

3- the feeling of independence that would stem from setting oneself free from London-originated planning rules, which would not apply to Scottish Land and in particular Glasgow, with its long standing competitive edge with Edinburgh (this touches far too deep-rooted historical motivation to be expanded, so let's take it for granted for argument's sake)

4- the convergence of imported architectural theories -with all the problems arising with their third-hand translations, distortions and interpretational liberties- and the economic value given by large orders of the same stock of precast concrete blocks. In effect the colluding of these two factors -the architectural/academic and the economic- was the major responsible for the wave of high rise housing throughout Europe in the 60's-70's.

So, in the space of few years, between 1962-1968, Glasgow all of a sudden had more contracts for public housing awarded than in the rest of the country!

Once again, the 'storm of progress' blowing heavily its one-way forward gale...

Their legacy now?

Not even refugees and political asylum seekers escaped from countries with oppressing regimes wants to live in places like the Red Road estate. The concept of Fourth World spring to mind. Or is it the Fifth by now?

Coming closer to our days, and talking about council properties sell-out, a case recently stuck out whilst reading the local papers, mostly because of its striking resemblance to events which are occurring in London, right next to where I live.

It concerns the local swimming baths of Govanhill, neighbouring the Gorbals.

Just as next door, the earthmovers and the sledgehammers are paving the way for the future of the Gorbals, Govanhill seems to be still looking for some life to be pumped back into it. Nevertheless the local pool was heavily used mostly because, being old baths of the Victorian kind, the man and woman still had separate areas.

This detail, seemingly irrelevant to us, made a lot of sense for the local community, which is densely populated by Muslims, since their religion is much stricter on public exposure of flesh.

Indifferent to this, the Council decided to close the Baths and after an initial round of protest by the local community groups, suggested people would use the nearby brand new Leisure Centre in the Gorbals.

Apparently Glasgow is a high scorer on leisure facilities pro-capita, which means having a certain number of treadmills per hundreds of people, length of swimming pools per head and so on.

This, in their view, makes legitimate the decision of closing down the local swimming pool, even if highly frequented, a way of 'optimising the leisure resources in the city'

The Gorbals leisure centre needs to be reached by bus from Govanhill, is twice as expensive than the local pool and being of a contemporary design, it does not operate the kind of distinctions between gender so important for the local Muslim people.

The response of the Govanhill people was to occupy the pool until reopening is forced on the council. I have no further news on how the situation developed since, but the direct action still maintains the needs to assert one's right in the face of public bodies which forget their 'public' (as 'of the people') duties.

As a London counterpart to this story, the local Haggerston Baths, a local equivalent of Govanhill Leisure centre, has just being closed down to be redeveloped into luxury flats. The next leisure centre is now several miles further East or North London.

A graffiti on the walls of the empty building waiting for its new purpose read: 'GIVE US BACK OUR POOL'. The possibility of occupation of the pool has not crossed the locals' mind yet.

Why am I spending your time telling you about closing pools and citizens direct action?

Well, it's simply to confirm that no matter how far we are from the past, a trend is clear: we are no more in charge than we've ever been about our cities destiny, no matter how many consultation process are set up all over the country.

This to me, as an artist commissioned to create an artwork for the 'people of the Gorbals' is very important to keep in mind. I have to be aware of the likely pinch of scepticism with which this scheme might be received by the locals. It is the burden of recent history of unfulfilled expectation that creeps into the natural curiosity for novelty.

Someone I was talking to, told me about the Gorbals seagulls: "they come, they shit on us, they go away".

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During the first slum clearance, which gave us the high rises we are now demolishing, there was no public art program.

Both the art world and the authorities involved at the time were far from thinking of each other as potential partners. Public art -the term merely existing then- was more to do with Jean Dubuffet doing its primitive sculptural act in front of Mies Van der Rohe's modernist totems in New York, rather than dealing with slum clearances and housing estates in Scotland.

This was a serious business, a business about desperate need for housing for desperate people, a true cleaning spring, not an art exhibition.

Although I am sure many people wandered around those debris with open eyes, trying hard to remember not to forget, there is no sign of any artefact left from that period.

I wonder though, if public art would have then been written in the government white papers on urban regeneration, what would have happened?

What would we see now in the Gorbals from the artists commissioned witnessing those dramatic moment, that wasn't the business of reportage?

What language that past would speak to us now, other than the memory of the people who survived it, the hundreds of photographs taken and the lengths of Pathé newsreels captured?

In a way, back then, the drastic changes imposed on the area by the slum clearance were much more dramatic than the ones we are witnessing now. That was the real stretch, the surgical seizure of the past and the birth of a radically new way of living.

After all, it is clear that the current masterplan for the Gorbals is, in between other issues, strongly preoccupied with healing the wounds inferred by those radical plans.

In our present times of revisionism, we are repairing, restoring, reappraising.

The contemporary model for public housing is in many ways the product of a revision of ideas which in the early 60's were thought as obsolete, backward-looking or simply plain wrong.

This is also a means for architectural language to deal with its own past and evolve into a new language.

But for me, as an artist, I am a new factor in the equation.

How am I going to position myself in the project?

History gives me a chance here and now to produce something of value for the people of the Gorbals.

But who are 'the people of the Gorbals'?

Whose interests, apart from my artistic integrity, am I supposed to look after?

Which community am I addressing my points to?

Am I talking to ghosts? Awakening the dead? Or putting them to rest forever in the assurance that no one now will hurt their land anymore?

What will bring newcomers to the Gorbals? Who will they be? Will they be interested at all the Gorbals's history.

Will some of those who are gone come back? Or some more will move away from it?

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As this questions hurled into my mind, in the last few months I tried to gave them some answer, then quickly denied, then in some cases I came back to them, just to definitely dump them few days later.

Everytime I come back to Glasgow I have the feeling that I am witnessing a transitory moment of capital importance for the Gorbals. Like all transitions, it is a bit like a rite of passage, in which an old fool mutters nonsense in the air, standing lonely in square where a market used to be.

These are strangely divining moments where old photographs become historical references, old people become local shaman, and young people become bored, restless and wandering what all this fuss is about.

The quiet before the 'storm of progress' hits the Gorbals once again.

I feel like I am walking through a warzone in the aftermath of a battle. But strangely I know that I like this moment; I like it because it has a sense of uncertainty which is more liberating than the certainties we are settling for.

It is also a moment in which time seems to stand still before acceleration takes over.

For this reason, I believe the permanent artwork for the Gorbals should be about time.

Not time as GMT, but time as Gorbals Mean Time, a log of time starting anew and going on until the conditions around it let it survive.

It feels like I am just starting to come to terms with the overwhelming power of the Gorbals story.

Let's build a shelter for the next storm.