

# Imagining the street in post-war Britain

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**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses the changing ways in which the residential street has been imagined in post-war Britain. From the ethnographers and street photographers who emerged in Bethnal Green in the late 1940s and early 1950s, to the planning concept of 'streets in the air', to modern geodemographics, the street has been a way of thinking through shifting ideas about civil society and collective social life. Imagined as a space of spontaneous community when set against the rational, contractual operations of both the market and the state, the street has been a means of articulating hopes for and anxieties about social change.

The terraced street occupies a unique place in the British imagination. It was the most common form of mass urban housing in Britain from the late eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century and, although they were not built in great numbers after World War I, terraced streets still dominated the urban landscape at the end of World War II. In the post-war era, as many of these streets were demolished by slum clearance programmes or began to be refurbished and 'gentrified' by middle-class families, the street became a significant site of cultural-political meaning and contestation. Emerging out of Bethnal Green in the late 1940s, a loose alliance of non-academic sociologists, photographers and architects began to read the street as a way of thinking through ideas about civil society and collective social life in the changing political culture of post-war Britain. Imagined as a space of spontaneous community when set against the rational, contractual operations of both the market and the state, the street became a symbolic means of articulating hopes for and anxieties about social and political change.

Much of this work has been discussed by historians in piecemeal form as part of wider discussions about the nature of working-class community, debates usefully summarized by both Alison Ravetz and David Kynaston.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, Robert Colls has taken issue with Joanna Bourke's revisionist reading of working-class, street-oriented community as a 'retrospective construction' and 'rhetorical device' by recalling the reality of the lively,

<sup>1</sup> A. Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (London, 2001), 157–74; D. Kynaston, *Family Britain 1951–57* (London, 2009), 221–46.

densely populated, woman-centred streets of his South Shields childhood in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Although I will return to some of these debates, my aim in this article is less to examine the historical sociology of the street than to explore its role in the post-war cultural, social and political imagination. I want to trace the development of this post-war tradition of imagining the street, with its unusual combination of sociological, visual and fictional registers, to see what it can tell us about our continuing investments in these ideas of community.

### Reading the post-war street

The idea of the working-class street as a model of neighbourliness and community crystallized among a number of writers, photographers and social observers in the immediate post-war era. Two of these were an upper-middle-class married couple, Judith Stephen and Nigel Henderson, who in 1945 went to live in Chisenhale Road, Bethnal Green, in London's East End. At the end of the war Stephen had responded to an advertisement placed by a sociologist, John Peterson, the warden of University House, one of the east London settlement houses, who was setting up a course called 'Discover Your Neighbour' aimed at making those involved in the welfare services more aware of life in working-class areas. As part of this project Henderson had to live in the community while spying on her neighbours, Leslie and Doreen Samuels, and their five young sons.<sup>3</sup>

Tom Harrisson, the co-founder of the social research organization Mass Observation, offered informal support, lending Stephen a typewriter and some money and having occasional lunches with her and her husband.<sup>4</sup> The continuities between Stephen's work and Mass Observation were clear: between 1937 and 1940, from its base at 85 Davenport Street, Bolton, Mass Observation had used the residential working-class street as the starting point for a homegrown anthropology. Explaining his return from anthropological work in Malekula in the western Pacific, Harrisson wrote that 'there was enough of the stuff right there on the cobbled street'.<sup>5</sup> With a background in anthropology, he focused primarily on observable behaviour, and much of his work in Bolton examined the silent, visual rituals of the street, such as housewives 'donkey-stoning' their front steps or their husbands standing silently by their front doors smoking their pipes.<sup>6</sup> 'Discover Your Neighbour' was partly inspired by Mass

<sup>2</sup> J. Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890–1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London, 1994), 169, 138; R. Colls, 'When we lived in communities', in R. Colls and R. Rodger (eds.), *Cities of Ideas: Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain, 1800–2000* (Aldershot, 2004), 283–307.

<sup>3</sup> See *Nigel Henderson: Photographs of Bethnal Green 1949–1952* (Nottingham, 1978), 30–52.

<sup>4</sup> V. Walsh, *Nigel Henderson: Parallel of Life and Art* (London, 2001), 53; M. Harrison, *Young Meteors: British Photojournalism: 1957–1965* (London, 1998), 23.

<sup>5</sup> T. Harrisson, *World Within: A Borneo Story* (London, 1959), 160.

<sup>6</sup> G. Cross (ed.), *Worktowners at Blackpool: Mass Observation and Popular Leisure in the 1930s* (London, 1990), 26–7.

Observation's interest in the overlooked exoticism of ordinary street life, a shift away from more earnest sociological preoccupations with poverty and poor housing. University students taking the course in 1947 were set seemingly random questions – 'Why do so many women in Bethnal Green, East End district of London, go shopping with their hair in curlers?' and 'Why do they always carry such large handbags?' – that owed much to Mass Observation's quasi-surrealist interest in the quotidian.<sup>7</sup>

Stephen's husband, Nigel Henderson, was meanwhile undertaking a different sort of street ethnography. His Bethnal Green street walks were inspired partly by his traumatic wartime experiences in the RAF, which had made him aware of the impossibility of taking the most mundane details of urban life for granted. He admired 'the humour and the fatalism of those trapped possibly by choice, in the small tribal liaisons of the back and side streets'.<sup>8</sup> Henderson described the atmosphere in Bethnal Green with impressionistic lyricism as one 'where the streets glint, grudgingly, like shabby coins ... where the air sighs with displacement as cyclist lunges past with fugitive resonance of rusty bell'.<sup>9</sup> His street photographs, taken between 1949 and 1953, focused on the aesthetic patterns of the rundown street – bombed-out houses, peeling flyposters and glass surface panes – and the formal-looking compositions made by people against this background, such as children climbing up lampposts or 'doodling' on their bicycles. Henderson included a selection of Stephen's notes on the Samuels family as the commentary to a catalogue of his photographs, implicitly connecting their different strands of street ethnography.<sup>10</sup>

Stephen and Henderson's work in Bethnal Green was the product of a particular post-war moment, representing a departure from the arithmetical social accounting of the social surveys of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by researchers such as Charles Booth and B. Seerbohm Rowntree. Like Mass Observation, their work owed more to the anthropology of tribal cultures and combined social concern with a certain aesthetic attraction to working-class street life. Stephen's covert sociology of the Samuels family – a very Mass Observation style espionage – made Henderson uneasy, but he was similarly attracted to the role of the 'naturalist-explorer' and to the sense of 'watching live theatre' and rituals that 'were formal, very strong and coercive to me [and] because of their unfamiliarity exotic'.<sup>11</sup> Focusing more on children at play than deprivation or slum housing, his work reflected both the optimistic rediscovery and

<sup>7</sup> 'Five will ask: "Why queue in your curlers"', *Daily Mirror* (10 Apr. 1947).

<sup>8</sup> *Nigel Henderson: Photographs of Bethnal Green*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in L. Mauderli, 'Bethnal Green: London's East End in Nigel Henderson's photographs', in C. Lichtenstein and T. Schreggenberger (eds.), *As Found: The Discovery of the Ordinary* (Baden, 2001), 84.

<sup>10</sup> R. Koslovsky, 'Urban play: intimate space and post-war subjectivity', in V. Di Palma, D. Periton and M. Lathouri (eds.), *Intimate Metropolis: Urban Subjects in the Modern City* (London, 2008), 204.

<sup>11</sup> Walsh, *Nigel Henderson*, 54, 49.

re-enchantment of ordinary life after wartime and an anticipatory nostalgia about the world that would be swept away by post-war reconstruction.

The same ambivalence is evident in the work of the west London street photographer Roger Mayne, who stayed with the Hendersons in Bethnal Green for a time when he first moved to London and in 1954 began photographing the streets of Kensal Town and Notting Hill. Mayne admired the 'unfettered physicality' of children playing outdoors and the 'decaying splendour' of the streets themselves. 'This I think is a positive way of life', he wrote. 'At the moment the planners are not sufficiently awake to the qualities of these streets which ultimately will have to go.'<sup>12</sup> Many of Mayne's photographs were originally published in the *Observer*, which particularly embraced this monochrome street aesthetic. 'Sensitive himself to a degree, he envies the working classes their lack of sensitivity', wrote the *Daily Telegraph's* Peter Simple about 'the *Observer* man' in 1956. 'He likes photographs of handsome, uncomplicated proletarians. Last Sunday he sighed wistfully over four photographs [by Mayne] illustrating what purported to be "the vitality of the working-class streets of London".'<sup>13</sup> In one sense, Simple's scepticism was justified because this kind of street photography represented a very specific example of working-class community. Writing about Mayne's photographs, the novelist Colin MacInnes noted that the Notting Hill streets had the uniquely public quality of 'a hard, animated Northern casbah' not shared by surrounding areas. 'This complex has a marked Anglo-Sicilian flavour', he wrote. 'The citizens, among whom a criminal element is traditional, live on the streets, in a way rare even in prosperous working-class areas.'<sup>14</sup>

These photographic and quasi-ethnographic street projects of the late 1940s and early 1950s had significant echoes in post-war social research and urban policy. As families were being moved out of the slums into new housing estates, sociologists were beginning to map this dying world of the 'slum' terrace and belatedly to notice the working-class street as not merely a dwelling place but 'a place of diversion, and also the playground of the poor'.<sup>15</sup> The most influential research in this area was undertaken by the Institute of Community Studies (ICS), with which Judith Stephen also had informal connections. In 1951, Michael Young, frustrated with his role directing the Labour party's research department, embarked on a doctoral dissertation, based in Bethnal Green, on the impact of rehousing on working-class communities. Young was impatient with the centralism of

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in J. Hardcastle, 'Four photographs in an English course book: a study in the visual archaeology of urban schooling', *Changing English*, 15, 1 (2008), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in M. Haworth-Booth, 'Roger Mayne's Southam Street', in *The Street Photographs of Roger Mayne* (London, 1986), 72.

<sup>14</sup> C. MacInnes, 'Poverty and poetry in W.10', *Observer* (21 Jan. 1962).

<sup>15</sup> R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 186; see also B.S. Rowntree and G.R. Lavers, *English Life and Leisure* (London, 1951), 128; and J.B. Mays, *Growing up in the City: A Study of Juvenile Delinquency in an Urban Neighbourhood* (Liverpool, 1954), 48.

the Attlee government and wanted to see what was worth preserving of the pre-welfare state East End communities. There were only two bus routes in the whole borough, so in order to explore it Young had, like Henderson around the same time, to walk through the side streets of terraced rows. Walking deliberately slowly or standing briefly on the painted doorsteps of the houses, he would try to 'listen for voices'.<sup>16</sup> Recent biographical accounts have suggested that, having survived a peripatetic early life and unhappy schooling, Young placed a high value on belonging, and that the Bethnal Green street dwellers were the first of many of his vicarious, extended families.<sup>17</sup> In 1953, he established the ICS with Peter Townsend and Peter Willmott. There were personal and geographical connections to earlier Bethnal Green sociology: the ICS found a permanent home in Victoria Park Square, next door to University House, where 'Discover Your Neighbour' had originated, and John Peterson took an interest in its work.<sup>18</sup>

The ICS placed great symbolic emphasis on a pervasive but sporadic phenomenon: the street party, which became a synecdoche for community spirit and neighbourliness. One of the ICS's first projects was to try to gauge the deeper meaning of the Coronation by dropping in on the East End street parties, which were also extensively photographed by Nigel Henderson. With Ed Shils, a visiting Chicago sociologist, Young argued that these street parties were evidence that the Coronation was a 'great nation-wide communion' in which 'a general warmth and congeniality permeated relations even with strangers'.<sup>19</sup> Mass Observation's panel members and other observers confirmed the large number of Coronation street parties in the working-class terraces of the inner cities.<sup>20</sup> But they were a relatively recent ritual. Although the first mass street parties had been thrown to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887, London's commissioner of police banned them at the end of World War I, being 'unable to countenance the obstruction of the public thoroughfares in this manner'.<sup>21</sup> They properly emerged as an officially sanctioned phenomenon for George VI's Coronation in May 1937 and were soon being nostalgically evoked as a dying ritual. As early as 1947, Judith Stephen's subject, Doreen Samuels, was wistfully recalling the bonfires and piano-playing in the streets on VE Day two years earlier, when 'you really got to know your neighbours'.<sup>22</sup> David Kynaston points out that the organization

<sup>16</sup> A. Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (Houndmills, 2001), 119.

<sup>17</sup> P. Barker, E. Bauer, B. Brown, G. Dench, N. Green and P. Hall, *The Meaning of the Jubilee*, June 2002, Institute of Community Studies Working Paper No. 1, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Briggs, *Michael Young*, 132–4.

<sup>19</sup> E. Shils and M. Young, 'The meaning of the Coronation', *Sociological Review*, 1, 2 (1953), 71, 73.

<sup>20</sup> See Kynaston, *Family Britain*, 293; *The Family: Report of the British National Conference on Social Work* (London, 1953), 2–3; M. Broady, 'The organisation of Coronation street parties', *Sociological Review*, 4, 2 (Dec. 1956), 229–38.

<sup>21</sup> 'Street parties still forbidden', *Times* (28 Aug. 1919).

<sup>22</sup> Nigel Henderson: *Photographs of Bethnal Green*, 40.

of Coronation street parties was often politically fraught and, rather than emerging organically out of a sense of esprit de corps, they arose more out of an expectation, a sense that they were the 'emblematic celebration, the one closest to most people's sense of what was fit and proper'.<sup>23</sup>

The street party also played a key evidential role in *Family and Kinship in East London*, based on research conducted in Bethnal Green and Dagenham between 1953 and 1955. As its key example of the informal social networks of the East End, the book used the Bethnal Green streets, known as turnings or back-doubles, which comprised 'a sort of "village" of 100 to 200 people' with rich networks of family and friendship, nearly every turning having its own committee and street party for the 1953 Coronation.<sup>24</sup> This was contrasted with the London County Council's post-war estate in Dagenham (named 'Greenleigh' in the book) where neighbours conducted their relationships on a 'window-to-window, not face-to-face' basis, an exchange made more difficult by the ubiquitous net curtains.<sup>25</sup>

Although the book follows conventional sociological methodology in its statistical tables and random samples, Young and Willmott were not trained sociologists and nor did they have the resources for extensive quantitative analysis. Their 'cottage industry sociology'<sup>26</sup> owed much to the intuitive, subjective, outdoor ethnography pioneered by Mass Observation. Much of their hopeful reading of Bethnal Green's community spirit was inspired not by systematic fieldwork but by informal encounters with their subjects. The ICS bought an old London taxi cab for £40 to enable its researchers to explore the back streets easily, and children on the streets would gather round it asking for a ride.<sup>27</sup> Young and Willmott (who both for a time lived in the flat above the Institute) would also watch 'young fathers wheeling prams up Bethnal Green Road on a Saturday morning, taking their little daughters for a row on the lake or playing with their sons on the putting green in front of the windows of the Institute of Community Studies'. For one passage of the book, intended to illustrate the intricate kinship relationships on Bethnal Green's streets, Willmott's wife, Phyllis, followed a housewife down the street to the shops as she nodded and chatted to passers-by and then explained who they were: 'she lives down our turning' or 'she lives in the same street as my sister'.<sup>28</sup>

Young and Willmott had novelists' eyes for nuggets of telling social detail. For example, the rhythmic parallelism of the long passage introducing 'Greenleigh' had clearly involved extensive drafting and gives a cinematic sense of an area in which there is too much open space and not enough public goods to sustain relationships: 'Instead of the sociable

<sup>23</sup> Kynaston, *Family Britain*, 303.

<sup>24</sup> M. Young and P. Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London, 1962; orig. edn, 1957), 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 163, 121.

<sup>26</sup> Briggs, *Michael Young*, 136.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>28</sup> Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship*, 24, 106.

squash of people and houses, workshops and lorries, there are the drawn-out roads and spacious open ground of the usual low-density estate.<sup>29</sup> Young's Ph.D. thesis, 'A study of the extended family in east London', written in 1953–54, which formed the basis for *Family and Kinship*, made even more of these vivid counterpoints: 'Instead of the bustle and shouting of the street markets, there are the hygienic halls of a few multiple stores. Instead of the fierce loyalties of the turnings, there are the strung-out streets in which everyone is a stranger.'<sup>30</sup>

Willmott, a more dispassionate author than Young, later conceded of *Family and Kinship* that they were 'never explicit about how far [Bethnal Green] was an extreme case in terms of local kinship and community and how far it was "typical"'.<sup>31</sup> Slightly later studies by the ICS pointed out that working-class street life had all the compromises and demands of intimacy; it was not the 'undiscriminating flow of public discourse' it might have seemed to outsiders but 'a constantly shifting pattern of exposure and suppression, as the participants sought both to repair and defend the limitations of their private lives'.<sup>32</sup> In his study of old people in Bethnal Green, Peter Townsend of the ICS found that the street was a neutral territory to conduct conversations, a way of maintaining the privacy of the home into which neighbours were rarely invited.<sup>33</sup>

Given the highly imagistic, sensuous style of *Family and Kinship*, it is not surprising that, just as there had been cross-fertilization between Judith Stephen's and Nigel Henderson's work, the aesthetics of street photography fed into the publication and promotion of the ICS's research, which shared some of street photography's interest in the unexpected social encounter, the fleeting instant, the captured moment. The bestselling Pelican edition of *Family and Kinship* had a cover photograph by the American photographer Don Hunstein of housewives standing in the street outside a pub. A Roger Mayne photograph of boys playing in the street provided the cover image for Willmott's 1963 study *Adolescent Boys of East London*, and Mayne's street photographs appeared on the covers of 33 more Penguin books of popular sociology between 1960 and 1973.<sup>34</sup> That *Family and Kinship* became a bestseller was probably partly due to its highly aestheticized and sometimes elegiac style and partly due to its feeding into a nascent public mood which remained hopeful about post-war reconstruction but was increasingly suspicious of the technocratic, centralized approach of the welfare state that was engineering it.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–2.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Kynaston, *Family Britain*, 341.

<sup>31</sup> P. Willmott, 'The Institute of Community Studies', in M. Bulmer (ed.), *Essays on the History of British Sociological Research* (Cambridge, 1985), 137.

<sup>32</sup> J. Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain 1832–1998* (Oxford, 1998), 145.

<sup>33</sup> P. Townsend, *The Family Life of Old People: An Enquiry in East London* (London, 1957), 122.

<sup>34</sup> Hardcastle, 'Four photographs in an English course book', 15.

### Streets in the air

Another significant influence wielded by Stephen's and Henderson's work was on the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, who got to know Henderson when they were both affiliated with the Independent Group. Inspired by Henderson, the Smithsons named the Independent Group's approach the 'As Found' aesthetic, which they described as 'a new seeing of the ordinary, an openness as to how prosaic "things" could re-energise our inventive activity'.<sup>35</sup> Henderson took the Smithsons on what Alison described as 'absolutely incredible' tours of the East End, 'pointing out this shop front, that twisted gutter and so on'. Peter observed that 'a walk with Nigel is to see the inanimate as animate . . . to have an affection between objects and people'.<sup>36</sup>

Henderson's street photographs formed a key part of the Smithsons' developing thesis that post-war urban planning was emphasizing the demands of commerce over the needs of communities. In 1952, the Smithsons entered a competition organized by the London City Corporation for the redevelopment of a bombed area of Golden Lane in the City of London. Although modernist architecture's traditional answer to the pre-modern disorder of the traditional street had been to build tower blocks set in parkland, the Smithsons believed heretically that, in creating a sense of belonging, 'the short narrow street of the slum succeeds where spacious redevelopment frequently fails'. Their Golden Lane project thus proposed medium-rise, elongated slab blocks joined by wide pedestrian decks, 'streets-in-the-air'. They used evocative examples – 'in the back gardens are pigeons and ferrets, and the shops are around the corner: you know the milkman' and the refuse chute would 'take the place of the village pump' – to suggest the idea of a traditional community.<sup>37</sup> The Smithsons' design, unplaced in the London City Corporation competition, only entered public consciousness a year later, at the presentation of the ninth CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) meeting at Aix-en-Provence in 1953. Peter Smithson designed photo montages showing the then vogueish film stars Gérard Philipe and Marilyn Monroe, the Indian prime minister Nehru and some Central School of Arts and Crafts students (including a young Terence Conran) walking along these 'streets in the air'. The montages, more artwork than architectural blueprint, were placed in a grille alongside some of Henderson's photographs of East End Coronation

<sup>35</sup> D. van den Heuvel and M. Risselada, 'Introduction: "Just a few houses . . ."', in D. van den Heuvel and M. Risselada (eds.), *Alison and Peter Smithson – from the House of the Future to a House of Today* (Rotterdam, 2004), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Walsh, *Nigel Henderson*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> A. Smithson (ed.), *Team 10 Primer* (London, 1968), 78; A. and P. Smithson, *Ordinariness and Light: Urban Theories, 1952–1960, and their Application in a Building Project 1963–1970* (Cambridge, MA, 1970), 52.



street parties and children playing hopscotch and skipping in Chisenhale Road.<sup>38</sup>

Other architects had more concrete success than the Smithsons in building streets in the air. Denys Lasdun's three Bethnal Green 'cluster blocks' – Usk Street, Claredale Street and Keeling House (1952–57) – fed into some of these ideas. Keeling House followed the form of four wings grouped around a central stair and liftwell, and was designed to act as a vertical version of a traditional street. The central area of each floor, Lasdun hoped, would become a noisy imitation of the pleasantly shambolic terraced rows, where people could enjoy a cigarette, admire the view and chat. Near the lifts there were communal 'drying areas', where residents could meet and gossip over their laundry as they had done in the streets below.

There was, however, a certain amount of retrospective justification of the cluster blocks along these lines as the ICS developed its ideas about working-class community in the surrounding streets. As John R. Gold points out, 'the claims for the building[s] steadily grew' in response to this new sociology in a way that 'progressively rewrote the rationale'. A layout whose benefits were originally seen as reducing noise for residents, avoiding the cost of duplicating lifts and stairs and increasing the amount of light in the flats changed, in the five years that the three blocks were completed, to represent the voguish idea of the 'vertical street'.<sup>39</sup> Sir Basil Spence probably also had this prevailing political mood in mind when he told the Glasgow city council housing committee that the communal balconies on his Queen Elizabeth tower blocks in the Gorbals (completed in 1961) were a continuation of the gregarious traditions of the tenements. In a gesture to both traditional street life and Glasgow's shipbuilding industry, Spence said that 'on Tuesdays, when all the washing's out, it'll be like a great ship in full sail!'<sup>40</sup>

The first full-scale realization of the Smithsons' 'streets in the air' concept was the zigzag blocks at Park Hill, Sheffield, completed in 1961. Instead of the usual four-foot-wide access balconies on tower blocks there were 12-foot-wide street decks on every third floor, open to the air and wide enough to accommodate prams, children's tricycles and small electric vehicles for milk and postal deliveries. Bridges connected the different blocks, so a pedestrian could cross the whole site at the level of each deck and, because of the steep topography, eventually arrive at ground level. One of the architects, Jack Lynn, believed that in tearing down whole streets which 'despite their sanitary shortcomings, harboured a social structure

<sup>38</sup> D. van den Heuvel, 'Urban structuring: models for mass housing', in Heuvel and Risselada (eds.), *Alison and Peter Smithson*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> J.R. Gold, *The Practice of Modernism: Modern Architects and Urban Transformation, 1954–1972* (London, 2007), 210–11.

<sup>40</sup> C. Robertson, "'A great ship in full sail": Basil Spence and Hutchesontown "C"', in M. Glendinning (ed.), *Rebuilding Scotland: The Post-war Vision, 1945–1975* (East Linton, 1997), 99.

of friendliness and mutual aid', we had 'thrown the baby out with the bathwater'.<sup>41</sup> He proudly noted the coloured linoleum strips with which residents ornamented their doorsteps at Park Hill, 'hesitant attempts at self-expression' which 'cannot be discovered by questionnaires'.<sup>42</sup>

Park Hill was widely filmed and photographed in the early 1960s, including three major commissions by Roger Mayne (for *Architectural Design* in 1961, a BBC documentary in 1964 and *Nova* magazine in 1966). Although Mayne himself seems to have become progressively more disillusioned with the scheme as he returned to it,<sup>43</sup> his early photographs of the estate, which showed housewives gossiping, children playing and the famous strips of lino by the front doors, did much to contribute to its initial positive reception.<sup>44</sup> Architectural critics and journalists largely accepted Lynn's self-appraisal of Park Hill's decks as a faithful recreation of the ground-level streets. The concrete decks acted as an 'internal street', wrote Nikolaus Pevsner approvingly, 'for the milkman to drive along, for children to play and for housewives to come out of their flats and chat'.<sup>45</sup> As late as 1968, the *Daily Mirror* journalist John Pilger wrote in complimentary tones about Park Hill that it 'planned to retain something of the neighbourly warmth of the old rotten rows . . . people can meet and chat, and the milkman can drive straight up to your door and no child need sit forlorn in his boxed isolation'.<sup>46</sup>

From very early on, though, the 'streets in the air' concept had its critics among people more familiar with the day-to-day workings of estates. In April 1961, Bill Murray, a housing manager working in Bethnal Green, recorded in his diary his reactions to a TV interview in which Lasdun argued that his cluster blocks had recreated the intimacy of the terraced streets: 'What a load of tommyrot! . . . he has been listening to those potty people who make surveys of family life in East London.'<sup>47</sup> In August 1961, the Town and Country Planning Association attacked the 'bogus sociology' it considered to underpin the Park Hill project, which was based on the 'unwarranted assumption' that proximity would create more community-conscious residents.<sup>48</sup> Peter Willmott and Edmund Cooney of the ICS also carried out a survey of Bethnal Green housing, including Keeling House, noting that the cluster layout turned the access galleries and bridges into wind tunnels so that, especially in cold weather, they were not spaces

<sup>41</sup> P. Dickens, S. Duncan, M. Goodwin and F. Gray, *Housing, States and Localities* (London, 1985), 176.

<sup>42</sup> M. Glendinning and S. Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* (New Haven, 1994), 127.

<sup>43</sup> Harrison, *Young Meteors*, 46; see also R. Gosling, 'Introduction', in *Roger Mayne: Photographs* (London, 2001), 14.

<sup>44</sup> J. Hughes, '1961', in L. Campbell (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Architecture and its Histories* (London, 2000), 68.

<sup>45</sup> N. Pevsner, *Buildings of England: Yorkshire: West Riding* (Harmondsworth, 1967), 466.

<sup>46</sup> J. Pilger, 'Land of hope and agony', *Daily Mirror* (16 Jan. 1968).

<sup>47</sup> Gold, *The Practice of Modernism*, 211.

<sup>48</sup> 'Architectural critics', *Town and Country Planning*, 29, 8 (Aug. 1961), 337–8.

to linger.<sup>49</sup> In 1963, Paul Thompson wrote that the criss-cross pattern of galleries at Keeling House recalled the 'Piranesi engraving of a prison' and combined 'the aesthetic effects of an East End backyard and a Neapolitan tenement'. Thompson's own survey found that only 29 per cent of the building's residents felt it was easy to get to know their neighbours, and 47 per cent felt isolated from others.<sup>50</sup>

From the beginning, there was confusion over whether the street decks of the slab blocks were public or private space. Although they were used by milkmen and postmen, the police refused to patrol the Park Hill decks because they deemed them 'private property'.<sup>51</sup> By the early 1970s, as the later 'streets in the air' like Manchester's Hulme Crescents and the Smithsons' own Robin Hood Gardens in Poplar were completed, it was already clear that deck-access developments had failed to fulfil the ambitions of their designers to recreate the sociability of the ground-level streets. Numbering thousands of flats rather than the hundreds of the point blocks, they simply enforced communal living on a grand scale, creating chronic problems of vandalism, crime and lack of privacy.<sup>52</sup>

What now seems obvious about the rhetoric of the deck-access architects is its capture of a particular historical conjuncture which it then presented as organic and enduring. The types of working-class community to which it referred were born out of specific historical conditions which were rapidly shifting in response to the socio-political mood of consumerist aspiration which emerged from the mid-1950s onwards. Washing machines, refrigerators and television sets began to impact on the life of the street by turning households in on themselves, while cheap family saloons like the New Austin Seven (launched in 1951) and the Ford Popular (1953) made even the working classes more mobile and their social networks more dispersed. The 'fetishisation of home-based privacy',<sup>53</sup> as Jerry White terms it, which emerged in middle-class neighbourhoods in the inter-war era, was now affecting many working-class streets, not simply those on the spread-out estates. Alison Ravetz suggests that this process of increasing privatism on working-class streets began as early as the 1930s.<sup>54</sup> Raymond Williams defined this trend as 'mobile privatisation', with people increasingly living in small family units but with an 'unprecedented mobility of such restricted privacies'.<sup>55</sup> The new tools of social life, such as cars, telephones and televisions, would,

<sup>49</sup> N. Taylor, *The Village in the City* (London, 1973), 87–8.

<sup>50</sup> P. Thompson, *Architecture: Art or Social Service?* (London, 1963), 12.

<sup>51</sup> M. Parkin, 'Skyway guard on flats', *Guardian* (7 Dec. 1962).

<sup>52</sup> P. Hildrew and H. Hebert, 'Trial and error in concrete', *Guardian* (8 Aug. 1973).

<sup>53</sup> J. White, *The Worst Street in North London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, Between the Wars* (London, 1986), 134.

<sup>54</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 161–3.

<sup>55</sup> R. Williams, *Towards 2000* (London, 1983), 188; see also R. Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London, 1990; orig. edn, 1973), 26.

Williams predicted, enhance the mobility and connectedness of individuals but deplete public goods and public spaces.

The ICS may have located the essence of East End community in the Coronation street party but the Coronation also marked a tipping point in the take-up of television, with more than a million sets being bought that year.<sup>56</sup> Tom Harrisson identified this key change in 1960 when he returned, 20 years after Mass Observation's study of Worktown, to Davenport Street, Bolton, and noted that its houses were shifting their centre of gravity inwards as over three-quarters of them now had televisions: one of the most visible changes to the street was the number of antennae on roofs.<sup>57</sup> Willmott and Young had cited the much greater number of televisions in Dagenham as evidence of the privatization of experience.<sup>58</sup> But Harrisson's observations on Bolton suggested that what they found in Dagenham was simply an acceleration of trends occurring later in traditional districts. 'In so far as housing estates represent that exaggerated result of processes which are common to our society', wrote Norman Dennis presciently in 1958, 'it is only a matter of time before our Bethnal Greens become socially indistinguishable from housing estates.'<sup>59</sup>

In retrospect, too, it is clear that the advocates of the deck-access estates relied on a great deal of semi-anachronistic imagery. Milk floats, which assumed an exaggerated importance in both architectural and journalistic discussion as a symbol of the continuation of traditional street life on the decks, were still a common sight in the streets below but they were in long-term decline, many people preferring to buy milk from the shop or supermarket in a carton at a penny a pint cheaper. Sir Basil Spence's image of billowing washing stretching in lines across the street decks was becoming equally outmoded as even those who could not afford washing machines and tumble dryers increasingly used the coin-operated laundrettes which began to appear along shopping streets from the mid-1950s onwards. 'The sound of class war is drowned by the hum of the spin-dryer', noted Tory MP Charles Curran in a newspaper obituary of Aneurin Bevan in 1960.<sup>60</sup> Even some of the trivial details would soon be anomalous: Alison and Peter Smithson had calculated the width of their Golden Lane decks on the basis that 'two women with prams can stop and talk without blocking the flow'<sup>61</sup> but these cumbersome perambulators began to be replaced by smaller, lighter pushchairs from the late 1960s onwards.

Some of these social changes are evident in Roger Mayne's later pictures, taken in the 1960s, which show the first Vespas and Ford Populars arriving

<sup>56</sup> R. Maltby, *Dreams for Sale: Popular Culture in the 20th Century* (London, 1989), 204.

<sup>57</sup> T. Harrisson, *Britain Revisited* (London, 1961), 39, 41, 204–5.

<sup>58</sup> Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship*, 143.

<sup>59</sup> Norman Dennis, 'The popularity of the neighbourhood community idea', *Sociological Review*, 6, 2 (1958), 197–8.

<sup>60</sup> J. Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography* (London, 1997), xv.

<sup>61</sup> Smithson and Smithson, *Ordinariness and Light*, 57.

on the streets of Notting Hill. Shirley Baker, who between 1960 and 1973 photographed working-class streets in the inner-city districts of Salford and Hulme, also mapped this world on the cusp of a new home-centred consumerism. There is something jarring about Baker's photographs, because they pick up on the familiar visual tropes of what Chris Waters has termed 'urban pastoral', that mixture of anthropological curiosity and aesthetic contemplation that motivates much of the street photography of the 1940s and 1950s<sup>62</sup> – such as lines of washing along the street and boys swinging from ropes tied to lampposts – but they eschew the clean, semi-abstract compositions of Henderson's Bethnal Green work. Instead, they show streets cluttered with objects: new bicycles for the children, television aerials sprouting from roofs and motor cars, albeit old and second-hand, parked incongruously on Salford cobbles.<sup>63</sup>

### The death of the street

In 1960, while the idea of the close-knit street community was coming under threat from these social changes, it was given its most enduring articulation in the ITV Granada soap opera *Coronation Street*, with its opening and closing credit shots of Archie Street, an actual road in the area where Baker had begun taking her pictures: the congested dockside district of Ordsall, Salford, alongside the Manchester Ship Canal. The programme's creator, Tony Warren, had pitched the show as a *Family and Kinship*-style street anthropology: 'A fascinating freemasonry, a volume of unwritten rules. . . . To the uninitiated outsider, all this would be completely incomprehensible.'<sup>64</sup> While the show was immediately popular with viewers, many sceptical voices believed that the street represented an unfair, outdated image of the north. 'When I get driven in from the airport I can see many houses that are much nicer than those on your street', Granada's chairman, Sidney Bernstein, told the commissioning producer Harry Elton. 'Is this the image of Granadaland that we want to project to the rest of the country?'<sup>65</sup> In 1963, a village debating society in Hayfield, where Tony Warren lived, debated whether 'Coronation Street is a cul de sac'. One speaker blamed the programme for causing unemployment in the north, because its bleak imagery dissuaded businesses from investing in the region; another said it made people believe that 'Northerners were peasant morons'.<sup>66</sup> Harry Kershaw, the programme's executive producer,

<sup>62</sup> C. Waters, 'Representations of everyday life: L.S. Lowry and the landscape of memory in post-war Britain', *Representations*, 65 (1999), 131.

<sup>63</sup> Stephen Constantine, 'Street scenes: late afternoon', in Shirley Baker, *Street Photographs: Manchester and Salford* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1989), 12.

<sup>64</sup> D. Russell, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination* (Manchester, 2004), 199.

<sup>65</sup> H. Elton, 'The programme committee and *Coronation Street*', in J. Finch (ed.), *Granada TV: The First Generation* (Manchester, 2003), 101.

<sup>66</sup> 'Coronation Street the home of peasant morons?', *Guardian* (31 Jan. 1963).

insisted that the soap was not meant to be a period piece and that there were 'a hell of a lot of Coronation Streets still left – and if we have to wait till the bulldozers knock down the last one, we shall have a pretty long life'.<sup>67</sup>

As another example of how sociological and fictional discourses merged in these imaginings of the street, the programme began to feed into discussions about urban planning and modernization in the north – some using it to push for the acceleration of clearance programmes, others using it to support the growing arguments for rehabilitation over wholesale demolition. When Clancy Sigal argued in the *New Statesman* that *Coronation Street* 'solved' problems by 'the lie and gloss of togetherness', John Killeen replied that planners could learn much from the programme about the relationship between the built environment and social cohesion.<sup>68</sup> The architectural critic Reyner Banham responded to Killeen in an article entitled 'Coronation Street, Hoggartsborough', ostensibly a review of James Stirling and James Gowan's housing scheme at Avenham, Preston, a redbrick medium-rise development which aimed to reproduce the character of Victorian Preston and, with its communal access ramps, 'to maintain the vital spirit ("Saturday Night and Sunday Morning") of the alley, yard and street houses that the new development is replacing'.<sup>69</sup> An enthusiastic advocate of modern design and a qualified admirer of Lasdun's cluster blocks and Park Hill, Banham criticized Avenham's 'yelping red Accrington brick' and suggested that this emphasis on 'much that is valuable in proletarian culture *at the moment*' might 'leave a developing working class lumbered with an unsuitable functional environment 20 affluent years from now'. He went on to criticize these 'sentimental socialists who read the *Uses of Literacy* as a plea to put the clock back', conflating Tom Harrisson, Peter Smithson, *Family and Kinship*, Richard Hoggart and the makers of *Coronation Street* together as the intellectual parents of 'an architecture that forces the working class into the role of picturesque peasantry, a foreground frieze of Roger Mayne figures armed with Nigel Henderson bassinets'.<sup>70</sup>

The symbolic north of the 1960s was, in Raphael Samuel's words, 'definitely Mod, and on the side of radical change': it stood for the degentrification of national life, the rise of a modernizing meritocracy that would sweep away the class-ridden Tory establishment.<sup>71</sup> *Coronation Street* had an uneasy relationship with this symbolic north – one represented by a young prime minister, Harold Wilson, the Mersey sound in popular music and major redevelopment schemes in the inner cities of Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle. John Pilger's admiration for the Park Hill street

<sup>67</sup> G. Turner, *The North Country* (London, 1967), 408.

<sup>68</sup> *New Statesman* (12 Jan. 1962), 63; *New Statesman* (26 Jan. 1962), 122.

<sup>69</sup> Stirling quoted in Thompson, *Architecture*, 12.

<sup>70</sup> R. Banham, 'Coronation Street, Hoggartsborough', *New Statesman* (9 Feb. 1962), 200–1.

<sup>71</sup> R. Samuel, 'North and south', in A. Light with S. Alexander and G. Stedman Jones (eds.), *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain: Theatres of Memory*, vol. II (London, 1998), 165.

decks had been voiced in an article which argued that the person returning to the north after a long absence might still notice 'the sea of black bricked terraces and muddled streets' but would also see 'a new expression on the face of the North, as if the first layer of another skin has been grafted on to it'. A rueful Pilger wrote later about how the *Daily Mirror* had become an important propagandist for the optimism invested in Wilson's Labour party. He now felt that his article had falsely celebrated a modernization which was 'merely a process of bringing poverty up to date . . . The central myth was there; it was youth taking over a new, classless Britain, regardless of huge profit-making from jerry-built human pigeon lofts.'<sup>72</sup>

Actual streets like Coronation Street were being demolished in great numbers in the programme's early days: a common sight in Salford and Hulme in the 1960s was an entire row of houses marked with an X, under sentence of demolition.<sup>73</sup> Granada soon had to build its own street, first in the studio and then outside, there being no suitable ones left near the Granada Studios in Quay Street, Deansgate, in which to film exteriors. Archie Street, by then nicknamed 'Coronarchie Street' by locals, was condemned in 1967 in Salford's last great slum clearance scheme and finally demolished in 1971, when Bernard Youens and Jean Alexander, who played Stan and Hilda Ogden in the soap, went along to pay their last respects (in character).<sup>74</sup>

By then, at the end of the post-war clearance programme, terraced housing amounted to only 30 per cent of Britain's housing stock.<sup>75</sup> Britons were following the advice of Charles Curran MP and relying on mortgages and consumerism to take them on what he referred to in 1967 as the 'escalator from Coronation Street'.<sup>76</sup> The switch from local authority to private housing had been happening gradually since the Conservatives came to power in 1951. New private sector housing increased from 25,000 in that year to 226,000 by 1968, from 29 per cent to 53 per cent of all new stock.<sup>77</sup> The vast majority of this private building consciously departed from both the Coronation Street-style terrace and the communal slab block, returning to the format of the inter-war semi-detached house. These new private estates had curvilinear streets and culs-de-sac, with front gardens and driveways separating the house from the street.<sup>78</sup> In 1971, a member

<sup>72</sup> 'Is this the promised land?', *Daily Mirror* (14 Oct. 1964); J. Pilger, *Heroes* (London, 1989), 55–6.

<sup>73</sup> S. Baker, 'Street photographs', in Baker, *Street Photographs*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> 'The truth about Coronation Street', *Daily Mirror* (6 Aug. 1971).

<sup>75</sup> N. Couldry, 'Speaking up in a public place: the strange case of Rachel Whiteread's House', *New Formations*, 25 (1995), 110.

<sup>76</sup> L. Black, 'The impression of affluence: political culture in the 1950s and 1960s', in L. Black and H. Pemberton (eds.), *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War Golden Age Revisited* (Aldershot, 2004), 91.

<sup>77</sup> Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, 156; Office for National Statistics, *Social Trends*, no. 39 (Houndmills, 2009), 145.

<sup>78</sup> S. Penrose, *Images of Change: An Archaeology of England's Contemporary Landscape* (Swindon, 2007), 34–5.

of Hindley council successfully petitioned members of the highways and town planning committee to use 'Grove' rather than 'Street' in naming new housing developments, arguing that the Coronation Street image meant that 'streets have gone out of fashion and no one wants to live in one'.<sup>79</sup>

The planning hegemony of the cul-de-sac tied in with a new, proto-Thatcherite sensibility which valued private space and property ownership. Alice Coleman's 1985 book *Utopia on Trial*, which reported on a study made by her Land Research Unit at King's College London of all 4,099 blocks of flats and maisonnettes in the London boroughs of Southwark and Tower Hamlets (including Bethnal Green) appeared to offer a scientific basis for this new sensibility. The Unit's research methods owed more to the arithmetical social survey than post-war street anthropology. Coleman's team collected data on the design attributes and day-to-day function of these flats, recording the amount of litter, graffiti, vandalism and even human excrement and calculating a 'design disadvantage score' for each estate. The study concluded that the worst designs were slab blocks with interconnected walkways, the 'streets in the sky', which created a general feeling of neglect and lack of ownership. The best scores were obtained by the ordinary semi-detached houses of the inter-war period, with their clearly defined front gardens and projecting bay windows allowing residents to look out on three sides.<sup>80</sup> Coleman's work had a similar impact on the popular consciousness as Young and Willmott's *Family and Kinship* 30 years earlier. It fed into an emergent political climate which saw post-war planning as a well-meaning but misguided experiment in social engineering, and the 1960s and 1970s as an era of national decline and mismanagement. Coleman's book was widely and favourably covered in newspapers from the *Observer* to the *Daily Mail*, and she appeared on numerous television and radio programmes, including *Woman's Hour* and *Newsnight*, walking around housing estates with reporters and pointing out design faults.<sup>81</sup>

The most influential and vocal supporter of Coleman's ideas was Margaret Thatcher. By challenging the 'utopian' ambitions of post-war planners, Coleman's study tied in with some of the central tenets of Thatcherism: it explained crime and anti-social behaviour as consequences of over-directive planning rather than social inequality;<sup>82</sup> and, like Thatcherite housing policy, which introduced 'right to buy' for council tenants and drastically reduced expenditure on public housing, it valued

<sup>79</sup> 'Call it Grove, never Street', *Guardian* (5 Aug. 1971).

<sup>80</sup> A. Coleman, *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* (London, 1985), 45, 186–203.

<sup>81</sup> H. MacCaskill, 'Bestseller! The difficulties of publishing a book from scratch', *Guardian* (28 Oct. 1985).

<sup>82</sup> In prime minister's questions, Thatcher approvingly cited an article by Coleman in the *Daily Mail* on 22 Apr. 1987 in which she wrote: 'Historically, there is no evidence that joblessness is the major stimulus to crime.' Hansard, HC Deb, 30 Apr. 1987, vol. 115, cc. 409–12.



private ownership and the free market. Coleman, for instance, praised the inter-war semi because it had been constructed by private builders, not architects, and was thus the most advanced form of housing achieved before its 'natural evolution' was halted by post-war planning controls.<sup>83</sup> She was appointed as a consultant to the Department for the Environment in 1988 and in 1989 it introduced DICE (Design Improvement Controlled Experiment) schemes in many of the deck-access estates, replacing open courtyards with private gardens and blocking off the overhead walkways – marking the definitive end of the 'streets in the air' experiment.

While streets in the air were being discredited, however, the rehabilitation of the terraced street was beginning in certain areas of London through the free-market phenomenon of gentrification. One television critic in 1970 had wryly pointed out that Coronation Street was made up of the sort of dwellings now known in NW1 (the London postcode including gentrifying Camden) as 'artisans' cottages'.<sup>84</sup> These gentrified streets were often characterized as peculiarly private and inward-looking because they seemed to articulate a new idea of the private house as a site of lifestyle invention and equity accumulation. The more gentrified the street, the *Times* reported in June 1977, the less likely it was to have a party to celebrate the Queen's Silver Jubilee.<sup>85</sup> 'Gentrification begins where the Silver Jubilee decorations leave off', the *Observer* agreed.<sup>86</sup> As with the out-of-town estate in *Family and Kinship*, the gentrifying streets of London represented an acceleration of existing trends towards home-centred consumption and the extension of social networks beyond neighbourhoods – the kind of trend identified in Young and Willmott's 1973 work *The Symmetrical Family*, in which they explored the growing 'time squeeze' between family and working life as more women entered the workforce.<sup>87</sup> The sociable streets of Bethnal Green had been the domain of the housewife in an era of high male employment and gendered divisions of labour; gentrified streets, often made up of double-income professional families, were likely to be deserted in the daytime. By 1983, nearly half the labour force was made up of married women and it was not only middle-class streets that were emptier during the day.<sup>88</sup> Colls notes other factors in the decline of the street as a social space in these years: the fall in the number of married households, rising traffic levels and increasing distances between work and home.<sup>89</sup>

By the 1980s, the improvised markets of early gentrification were being overtaken by the more open political economy of the Thatcher

<sup>83</sup> Coleman, *Utopia on Trial*, 103.

<sup>84</sup> C. Dunkley, 'TV's endless street', *Times* (19 Aug. 1970).

<sup>85</sup> 'Street revellers brave the rain and bitter wind', *Times* (7 Jun. 1977).

<sup>86</sup> P. Phillips, 'Unkind cut for Islington's Camembert colonialists', *Observer* (21 Aug. 1977).

<sup>87</sup> M. Young and P. Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family: A Study of Work and Leisure in the London Region* (Harmondsworth, 1980: orig. edn, 1973), 101.

<sup>88</sup> R. Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford, 2002), 184.

<sup>89</sup> Colls, 'When we lived in communities', 305.

era. The housing market became more explicit in its operations, shifting the emphasis away from the collective action of middle-class pioneers, slowly colonizing up-and-coming areas, towards reliance on large-scale systems for reading the market. From the late 1980s onwards, the social meaning of individual streets became caught up in the emerging field of 'Neighbourhood Information Systems'. This strand of geodemographics – combining demographics with the new area of lifestyle research known as 'psychographics', which constructed profiles of consumer types – was pioneered in the UK by Richard Webber, a Cambridge economist who, while at the Centre of Environmental Studies in the late 1970s, was commissioned by Liverpool Council and the Department of the Environment to use cluster analysis of census variables to understand patterns of urban deprivation in the city, to help governments identify the need for different policy interventions at the level of individual streets.

When funding dried up after the Conservatives came to power in 1979, however, Webber shifted his research emphasis away from urban policy into consumer profiling. In 1979, while working for CACI, a company supplying retailers with access to census statistics for particular areas, Webber devised ACORN (A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods), which divided the country into groups of about 150 houses (roughly the size of a street), and then into 38 classes.<sup>90</sup> In 1986, Webber left CACI and developed a rival system, Mosaic, a more detailed digital database that profiled every postcode (a unit of about 15 houses) in the country. Mosaic drew on credit referencing datasets, the electoral roll, the census and county court bad debt judgments. It divided the population by postcode into named lifestyle groupings defined most commonly by house type ('Suburban Mock Tudor', 'Coronation Street', 'Gentrified Village').<sup>91</sup> These categories suggested the survival of stereotypical ideas about street communities even when combined with more scientific forms of measurement: a sort of statistical imaginary.

At first, these profiles of residential streets were simply used by companies to target mass mailshots or in retail planning. In the 1990s, however, Mosaic began to be used in crime prevention by the police and by political parties to target key voters. The Conservative party used a Mosaic-driven voter database to derive the pop-psychological category of 'pebbledash people' – identified as the suburban, swing voters whom the Tories had to win over in the 2001 general election – from the Mosaic classification of 'Pebble Dash Subtopia'.<sup>92</sup> In the 2000s, geodemographic classifications migrated from marketing and social research into the public domain. Information about individual streets could be readily accessed through websites such as *upmystreet.com*, which provided an ACORN

<sup>90</sup> R. Harris, P. Sleight and R. Webber, *Geodemographics, GIS and Neighbourhood Targeting* (Chichester, 2005), 55–6.

<sup>91</sup> R. Sharpe, 'M is for market research', *Observer* (4 May 1997).

<sup>92</sup> M.A. Sieghart, 'Pebbledash people', *Times* (2 Feb. 2001).

profile of every street in the UK. It was now free and easy to obtain a snapshot of the social composition of any street, from information about newspaper readership to how high its young people ranked for university admissions.

Geodemographics combined and confused the statistical and the subjective, conflating conventional demographic variables with a more nebulous field of values and lifestyles. It turned social division into a patchwork of consumer segments defined by taste and lifestyle choice as well as traditional indicators of income and occupation. Just as the Bethnal Green street ethnographers were the product of a particular post-war cultural moment, geodemographics emerged out of the preoccupations of post-Thatcherite political culture. The Bethnal Green ethnographers were relatively open about their own class and educational position and their interest in working-class culture that might today be seen as voyeuristic or paternalistic. With its democratization of knowledge and valuing of individual consumer choice, geodemographics sidestepped these questions of power by reducing its research to a series of consumer categories. Its form of street ethnography was almost entirely virtual: you could find out all you needed to know about a street – its status as a marketing or equity opportunity – without ever visiting it. Each street now had a collectively agreed meaning based on the market potential of its houses for interiorized reinvention and capital accumulation.

### **Conclusion: the street in cultural memory**

The recent fate of Park Hill, the most notorious concretization of the 'streets in the air' concept, is a telling illustration of both continuity and change in ways of imagining the street in post-war Britain. In a 1996 article, the Labour politician Roy Hattersley, who was involved in the building and early life of Park Hill as chair of the Sheffield City Council public works committee and then chair of the housing committee, reluctantly succumbed to the current orthodoxy and recognized that its idea of a cohesive street community had been overtaken by history. When Park Hill was built, he wrote, 'the passions of extended prosperity – garage, fence, garden, drive, car – had not consumed the lower-income groups'. But now Park Hill residents 'want to become a part of the new individualism, with custom-built bow-windows and curtains which can be identified from the road'.<sup>93</sup> English Heritage's decision to confer Grade II\* listed status on Park Hill in 1998 was met with public controversy and, with a few exceptions, criticism. In the national cultural memory, the now notorious phrase 'streets in the sky' had become synonymous with any sort of high-rise housing.<sup>94</sup> In popular planning demonology, tower blocks

<sup>93</sup> R. Hattersley, 'Time to knock them down', *Independent* (8 Sep. 1996).

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, L. Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London, 2008), 97–147, and M. Collins, *The Likes of Us: A Biography of the White Working Class* (London, 2004), 202–3.

were almost universally conflated with the slab blocks, when in reality the latter was a uniquely British reaction against the supposedly soulless modernism of the former, inspired by an informal anthropology of the traditional street. In 2007, the Park Hill flats began to be refurbished by the property development company Urban Splash. The street decks were to be semi-internalized as communal porches complete with house plants and beach loungers, and the flats themselves were refurbished to the high specification expected by Urban Splash's usual customers: young urban professionals. Park Hill was being turned into a neatly segregated environment in which leisure and living space were clearly demarcated – the kind of modernist segregation that the street decks had sought to challenge.<sup>95</sup>

The ideal of an informal street community has, however, proved remarkably resilient and is still employed, as Young and Willmott used it, to evoke a common social space somewhere between the anonymous state and atomized consumerism. In June 2002, a research team from the Institute of Community Studies fanned out across London over the weekend of the Queen's Golden Jubilee. Across the capital's streets, the researchers found an uncanny quietness: there were some street parties but nothing like the 4,000 reported in London for the 1977 Silver Jubilee. At one Dagenham street party, one of the team wrote, 'the level of jollification was pitifully small . . . The feeling of artificiality made my skin burn at ten paces.'<sup>96</sup> Like Shils and Young in 1953, the ICS researchers read the street party – or, in this case, its absence or its recycling as an empty ritual – as an impressionistic snapshot indicative of the existence or loss of a sense of community.

The street party still carries great symbolic weight in contemporary British culture, as is shown by organizations like Streets Alive and The Big Lunch, which have recently organized mass street parties as a way of fostering community spirit.<sup>97</sup> The brainchild of Tim Smit, chief executive of the Eden Project in Cornwall, The Big Lunch of 19 July 2009 was intended partly as an exercise in sustainable living: lunchers were urged to grow their own food or source it locally, and make bunting from recycled clothing. The aims of the Bethnal Green ethnographers – to reconnect people with their local surroundings and communities in order to mitigate the increasingly impersonal nature of their relations with the market and the state – were again being revived as the focus for a new parochialism, in response to a series of anxieties about longer commuting times, work-life imbalance and the virtualized nature of relationships conducted through social networking sites. It may seem that there is little in common superficially between the post-war Bethnal Green studies, the modern forms of geodemographics that have contributed to what Ash Amin and

<sup>95</sup> [www.urbansplash.co.uk/projects/park-hill](http://www.urbansplash.co.uk/projects/park-hill) (accessed 8 Aug. 2009).

<sup>96</sup> Barker *et al.*, *The Meaning of the Jubilee*, 16.

<sup>97</sup> *Easy Ways to Serve The Big Lunch: A Guide to Human Warming* (London, 2009), 3.

Nigel Thrift call the 'tyranny of the address' in modern societies as 'you become where you live'<sup>98</sup> and these more recent revivals of the street party. But in all these different imaginings of the street, it has remained a distinctively British frame within which to articulate wider fears about modernity's destruction of an organic *Gemeinschaft*. It has been a way of making sense of a series of social changes related to new patterns of work, suburbanization, growing affluence and the perceived domestication and privatization of experience.

The anthropologist Daniel Miller, who interviewed 30 people in an unnamed single street in an area of south-east London resembling New Cross, and concluded that the street was now merely a 'random juxtapositions of households', is sceptical about this symbolic load placed on the residential street. Miller concludes from his research that the street has little concept of community because 'the state operates too efficiently'. Local services, information and daily goods are supplied to homes in such a sophisticated, invisible way that 'we do not seem to require any active allegiance to, or alignment with, some abstract image of society or community, which lies closer to our daily lives'. But Miller argues that post-war sociology was mistaken in assuming that the decline of neighbourly contiguity would lead to 'disordered fragmentation'. The technological and cultural literacy of the modern household meant instead that people were capable of creating complex cosmologies within their own houses as well as connecting more easily with social networks beyond the street. These rich resources meant that 'the creative possibilities of tiny instances of humanity rival the diversity of societies traditionally studied by anthropologists ... this street is New Guinea and every household in this book is a tribe'.<sup>99</sup> Miller suggests that those searching for the sources of contemporary alienation in the decline of the street as a social space are looking in the wrong place.

The social life of the terraced street is now, in Robert Colls' words, 'a way of life as dead as that of the North American Plains Indian or the Mississippi sharecropper'. The decline of civil society is something of which governments are aware but powerless to do anything about while they remain tied to market models. Hence, according to Colls, the government's confused campaign against 'anti-social behaviour' and the constant evocation of the abstract noun of 'community'<sup>100</sup> – and, one might add, of the street as a model of neighbourliness and localism. In a society dislocated by the impersonality and impermanence of market relationships but suspicious of state solutions, the street remains one of the symbolic terrains on which the struggle between social-democratic and market-oriented ideas of the public sphere is fought out.

<sup>98</sup> A. Amin and N. Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (London, 2002), 43, 45.

<sup>99</sup> D. Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge, 2008), 283, 293, 295.

<sup>100</sup> Colls, 'When we lived in communities', 307.