



Vista aérea de Pruitt-Igoe, 1968

# PLOTTING

The collective life of buildings in time, what could be called their metabolism, has a profound relationship with their plots - the areas of ground that they occupy. Destruction can become a charged moment when such patterns of ownership can be redrawn, a moment which frequently overwhelms the subsequent intent of the architect or designer. It is a potent reminder that construction is the beginning, rather than the end, of a building's life.

The size of a plot, or the complexity of its ownership, is intimately related to processes of change in any city or built environment. Small change has a small effect and can happen frequently: a building can accommodate several lifetime's worth of different functions at street level while the residential uses above continue undisturbed, whilst a single terraced building can change entirely without damaging its neighbours or its street. In contrast, the demolition of an entire terrace is almost inevitably an act of violence to its context<sup>1</sup>.

The built environment industry (with the notable exception of demolition contractors) ideologically prioritises construction over destruction. Demolition, though a complex and artful process, is frequently ignored in the representation of the built environment,

unless it serves as the prelude to a story of reconstruction<sup>2</sup>. This phenomenon is echoed in the way we date works of architecture - by their completion rather than their lifetime.

Plot size provides an effective critique of the *comprehensive redevelopment* projects of the post-war period: the widespread land-parcelling of areas of city to form new districts and estates. The history of their failure has been written many times, but frequently the failure is described in purely spatial or aesthetic terms. What is not frequently discussed is the change in plot size inherent in such projects, the shifting of land from multiple ownership to single ownership, and the massive all-in-one destruction and site preparation that it entails. This change unites the post-war development boom with new business districts like Canary Wharf (1988-): opposing versions of modernity that both depend upon the parcelling together of previously disparate land ownerships. The replacement of fine-grain with coarse-grain can be considered a characteristic of all modernism, and is found in projects from the building of the railways to Haussmann's Paris (1852-, fig.1), from Plan Voisin (1925) to Pruitt-Igoe (1954-76).

This understanding of the metabolism of places may sound obvious but it is not widely understood by the people with the power

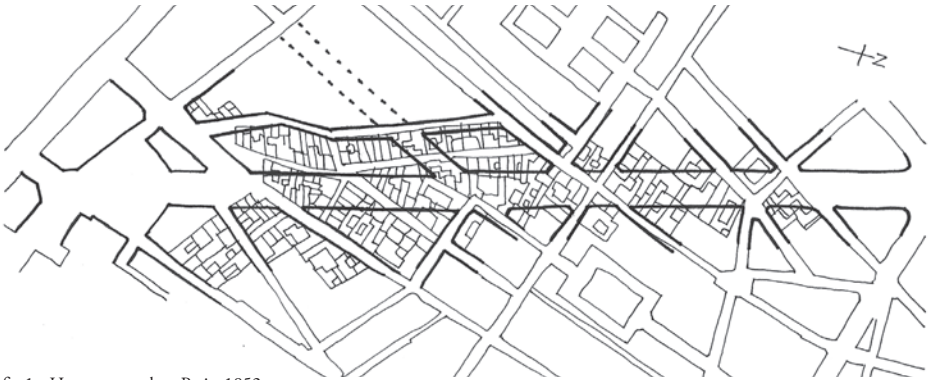


fig.1 - Haussmann plan, Paris, 1852

and influence to change them. Colin Ward describes how the centre of Birmingham was ruined not by the stylistic precepts of modernism but by the principle of land-parcelling, and recent attempts to recover the city from the *dark days* of its post-war makeover have led to more, not less of the city centre passing into sole ownership: entire streets passing into the private sector<sup>3</sup>. This example raises the issue that once plots have got big, they are hard to subdivide, not because of ownership but because “After a generation or two, the whole environment becomes obsolete simultaneously, so that total destruction and replacement have to happen all over again”<sup>4</sup>.

Similarly, New Urbanist experiments like Poundbury (1993-) in Dorset attempt to replicate the piecemeal growth of an English village, but do so with a fully-detailed plan and an incredibly constraining design code which explicitly forbids ad-hoc development<sup>5</sup>. Aldo Rossi’s *Quartier Schützenstrasse* (1998-) mimics the growth of a Berlin urban block but was all built at once, as artfully composed as a Palladio façade. This latter project recognises the visual diversity of small plots whilst apparently missing their social diversity, a characteristic of much of the current *rehabilitation* of central Porto, where patchwork *heritage* street elevations – entirely a product of the economy of small plots - are being retained as

the front facades of land-parcelled apartment blocks- a change which almost invisibly, yet fundamentally, alters the character of the city to the point where its whole social structure will have changed without any publicly visible difference.

This is not necessarily to demonise large buildings or large plots, but to place them into a complex economy of spatial change, to better understand their consequences for urban life. The process can of course go both ways. The commercial reality of land-parcelling has its opposite in property laws across the world that create ever-decreasing plot sizes by splitting inheritance rights among children of the deceased: a phenomenon that can strangle the city through complexity. This, however, is the exception rather than the rule, and in the contemporary city the bigger violence is produced by the bigger plot. As noted earlier, once land has been parcelled up, there’s very little going back: the delicacy and complexity lost through this process is very hard, if not impossible, to recover. This simple fact gives the lie to so much urban design guidance, which can describe in idealistic terms the value of a *diverse streetscape* without any understanding of the processes that created our most lively and diverse urban places in the first place. In its place we might imagine subdivision systems like the *burgage* tenements

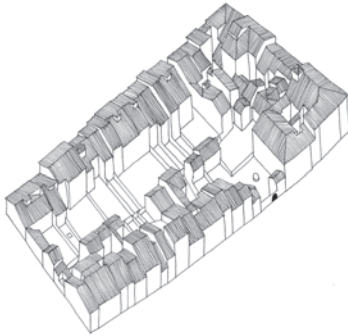


fig.2 - Bologna Quartier

found in medieval market towns, enduring urban forms derived from field sizes that, by using a long narrow plot, allowed for flexible and individual occupation of the site whilst retaining a narrow, but vital presence on the street or market place (fig.3).

Until a campaign led by Cedric Price, the only architect member of the National Federation of Demolition Contractors, it was against the RIBA<sup>6</sup> code of conduct for an architect to advise a client to *do nothing*. It was assumed, until Price's campaign, that if a client engaged an architect then the only possible outcome would be the production of new architecture. To go against this assumption would be equal, in theory, to taking a bribe or falsifying a building permit<sup>7</sup>. With this intervention, Price draws attention to the artificial limits of an architectural practice concerned only with the production of new architecture within predetermined constraints. In giving architects the freedom to *do nothing*, he is therefore asking them to *do more*.

It is time to recognise the humility of building design in relation to the overwhelming significance of plot size. Engaging with the



fig.3 - Square, Chipping Norton

political and territorial scale of our built environment, rather than just its aesthetic scale, is one way of living up to Price's request. It also suggests a renewed engagement with the methods, positive and negative, by which the processes of planning and property subdivide the world.

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1 For a broader discussion of this phenomenon, see Anne Vernez Moudon, *Built for Change: Neighborhood Architecture in San Francisco* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986) and Brand, Stewart, *How Buildings Learn: What happens after they're built* (New York: Viking Press, 1994)

2 The demolition of post-war residential blocks as a spectacle is well documented by Joe Kerr. Joe Kerr, 'Blowdown: The Rise and Fall of London's Tower Blocks', in *London: From Punk to Blair*, ed. By Joe Kerr and Andrew Gibson (London: Reaktion Books, 2003)

3 For an excellent description of this situation, see Anna Minton, *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First Century City* (London: Penguin Books, 2009)

4 Colin Ward, *Welcome Thinner City* (London: Bedford Square Press, 1989), p.23.

5 For ad description of this see Finn Williams, David Knight and Ulf Hackauf, 'Building without Bureaucracy', *l'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* 378, June-July 2010.

6 The Royal Institute of British Architects, [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com) (Accessed 27.01.2011)

7 For an introduction to the life and work see Mathews, Stanley, *From Agit-Prop to Free Space: The Architecture of Cedric Price* (London: Black Dog, 2007)