

# URBAN DESIGN

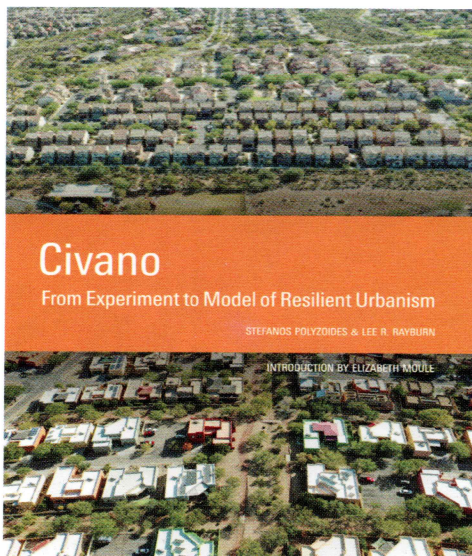
ISSUE 169 — WINTER 2024

## PLACEMAKING TOOLS



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## Civano, From Experiment to Model of Resilient Urbanism

Stefanos Polyzoides and Lee R Rayburn, 2022, ORO Editions, £35.00, ISBN 978 1954081925

Civano is a new settlement to the south-east of Tucson, Arizona, which has its roots in both the embryonic New Urbanism movement and the Whole Earth Catalog. Planned by the firm of Moule and Polyzoides, the authors draw on their own records to document the urban design process and assess the results, with Elizabeth Moule providing an insightful introduction.

Built in the Sonoran Desert and originally conceived 'as a solar village with the objective of reducing water and energy consumption', the experiment is even more relevant 40 years later as climate change affects the design of all new neighbourhoods; the masterplan seeks to modify microclimates by narrowing streets and planting tree canopies to shade the public realm.

The mixed use neighbourhood comprises 600 homes, largely custom-built. It was developed under a public-private sector partnership between private developers and the City of Tucson. The first phase was supported by the Fannie Mae mortgage company with later phases handed to 'more pragmatic' builders. The authors state that the project offered 'the possibility of convincing a broad segment of the market... to change its assumptions about what a "good place to live" should be'.

Civano stands in a canon of North American idealistic and ambitious new settlements from Savannah to Seaside. The design and delivery of new neighbourhoods is complex, and departing from planning

and construction norms requires Herculean efforts. Flagship developments routinely receive mixed receptions, yet so many factors are beyond the control of their creators. The book's authors recognise that Civano is imperfect. Its very location away from established urban centres led to an assumption that it would be a car-oriented development. Yet this account of the making of Civano carries lessons for the planning of any new neighbourhood with the goals of compactness, sociability and a response to context and heritage. But it is the attempt to create an equitable microclimate within the public realm that perhaps offers urban designers in other climes some encouragement and clues in a world of climate change. ●

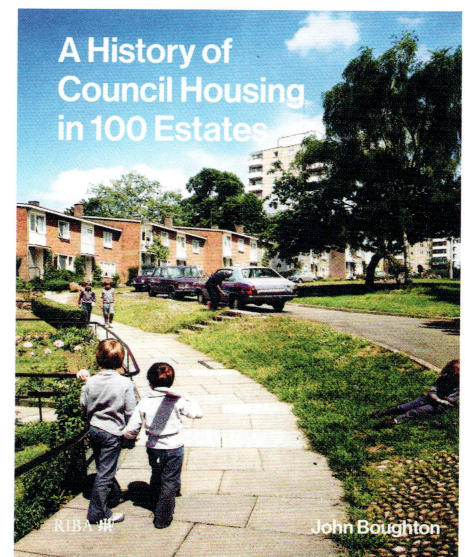
Roger Evans, urban designer and UDG Patron

## A History of Council Housing in 100 Estates

John Boughton, 2022, RIBA Publishing, £40.00, ISBN 978 1914124631

In many ways, the history of council housing is a cross-section of the political and economic history of the UK. Policies and practices have fluctuated, not only in response to changing governments and their differing attitudes to public spending and the built environment, but also to contextual events such as world wars and an enthusiasm for industrialised building technology. John Boughton is a scholar and a historian who, probably better than anyone else, has his finger on this history and its consequences for our towns and cities, and the way we live. I reviewed his earlier book on council housing, *Municipal Dreams*, in UD153. In his new book there is some going over the same ground, but it is a much more extensive coverage of places built and inhabited, and how they reflect changing policies and circumstances.

The book has a rigorous structure: nine chronological chapters, divided into 36 thematic sections with titles such as Homes for Heroes, Radburn and Low-rise, High Density. Each section has a one-page summary, followed by illustrated case studies from all four UK countries – 100 in all. Boughton has an ideological commitment to



municipal housing as a whole, but he is very fair-minded and objective in his analysis of developments, some of which are diametrically opposed in their form to others from a different period of history. Some are unequivocally failures, such as the Hulme Crescents in Manchester; some have stood the test of time, such as Crawley New Town; and some will be unfamiliar to many readers. Boughton does permit himself some concise and pithy comments, such as this on Modern Methods of Construction: 'There is in fact little that is modern in this approach, and it remains to be seen if this latest iteration of the long-held aspiration to build rapidly and more cheaply using mechanized methods will be more successful, practically and aesthetically, than some in the past'.

The title refers to 100 estates. An interesting issue, not mentioned in the book, is whether the undeniable unpopularity of municipal housing, at some times and in some places, is at least partly attributable to housing being built at a scale and in a form that clearly, and deliberately, separates it from its surrounding urban context. The notorious Broadwater Farm Estate in London is a pathological example. Even Peter Barber's Donnybrook Quarter – low-rise, street-based, with front doors at street level – delights in looking more like a piece of Marbella than Tower Hamlets. I am inclined to think that the more that a municipal development is absorbed into its context – like Goldsmith Street in Norwich, Boughton's 100th selection – the better. ●

Joe Holyoak, architect and urban designer



## Lubetkin and Goldfinger

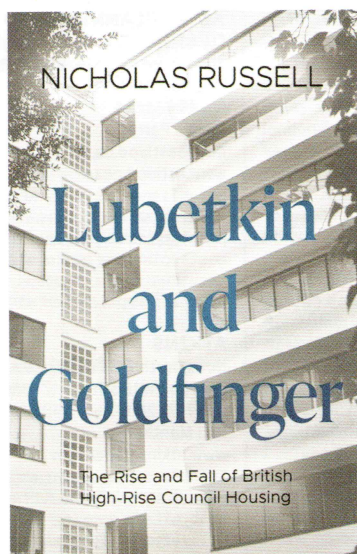
Nicholas Russell, 2023,  
The Book Guild Ltd, £9.99,  
ISBN 978 1915603746

Most books reviewed here are written either by urban designers or related professionals, or by journalists with expertise in the subject. This book is different. Its author's qualification for writing about two outstanding modernist 20th century architects, Berthold Lubetkin (1901-1990) and Erno Goldfinger (1902-1987), is that he was a National Trust volunteer tour guide at Goldfinger's house at 2 Willow Road in Hampstead, London. This qualification is fairly slight, and so is his book, but he brings to his task an enthusiasm for his subjects which makes the book readable and enjoyable. (He mentions Auguste Perret's hat on a bookshelf at Willow Road, which Goldfinger pointed out with pride to my students when we visited in the 1970s).

Russell lays out two lives in parallel. Born one year apart, died three years apart. One born in Georgia, one born in Hungary. They studied together in Auguste Perret's atelier in Paris in the 1920s. Both were communists who emigrated to Britain in the 1930s and brought with them their ideals of a socialist architecture. Both built relatively little in Britain, as their socialist ideals struggled to find support in a largely unsympathetic culture. But both built significant high-rise housing developments for London councils. And both thoroughly disliked the other.

The book's subtitle is *The Rise and Fall of British High-Rise Council Housing*. It's an ambitious target which is not really achieved. Russell's route is discursive, taking in various other interesting aspects of his subjects' lives. It might have been better to have aimed at a more general comparison between the two lives, and their relationship to architectural culture in Britain more widely.

Russell explains their limited success in Britain as being down to their reluctance to compromise their ideals – 'Nothing is too good for ordinary people' said Lubetkin – and by their difficult personalities: Goldfinger sacked 13 assistants in one year, and Ian Fleming's antipathy to him became legendary. The author calls them 'monsters with



the best of intentions' and admires their stubbornness. It would be interesting to know his own political affiliation. He displays much sympathy towards his subjects, especially Lubetkin. Lubetkin had earlier success with his firm Tecton, designing the Highpoint I flats in 1935 for the Gestetner company, and from 1946 building the Spa Green Estate for Finsbury Council. Goldfinger took longer to achieve success (or notoriety), with Balfron Tower in Poplar in 1968, and in 1972 Trellick Tower in North Kensington. The book is more about architecture than urban design, but read between the lines and there are big implications for urban form. ●

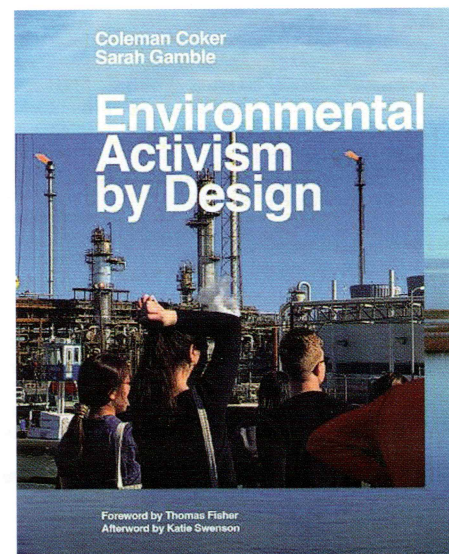
Joe Holyoak

## Environmental Activism by Design

Coleman Coker and Sarah Gamble,  
2022, ORO Editions, £29.95,  
ISBN 978 1954081796

This book offers a much-needed contribution to architectural pedagogy and practice during a climate and ecological emergency. It documents and discusses work undertaken over the past ten years by the Gulf Coast Design Lab (GCDL), a final-year architecture studio at the University of Texas.

The authors' argument is grounded in a fundamental question of ethics in architectural practice. They see ethics as a matter of action, embracing our responsibility as designers to respond to a worsening crisis that poses an existential threat to all. From a pedagogical perspective, the book critiques models in which students are taught to aspire to become 'starchitects' and proposes a



radical alternative: a design-build training as a tool to bring environmental education and activism into the design studio. Students confront existential questions about the world, while they learn through proposing and building concrete responses to a design brief. This is relevant for design students who are acutely aware of the fundamental transformations they will see in their lifetimes, especially in how architectural design is practised.

The book starts by listing all 29 GCDL projects, detailing the participants and locations. Four chapter-essays follow; each documents two GCDL projects and develops broader arguments about rapidly changing environments (Chapter 1), models of learning and design praxis (Chapter 2), motivations, aspirations and working with residents at the frontline of environmental injustices (Chapter 3), and connections between local complexities and issues at the global scale (Chapter 4). The essays incorporate quotes from project participants and are illustrated with plans and photographs.

Vignettes of the projects explain in detail the challenges faced by the team when working for clients in the Gulf Coast. One to highlight is FLOAT, which involved an unusual combination of technical, logistic and programmatic challenges. Students were faced with the complexities of the coexistence of human and non-human life.

Overall, the book is a must-read for design practitioners and scholars who are interested in making a difference in a world of crises. It aims to create hope out of anger and heartbreak, to push us into action and to think about how architectural practice can be a form of activism. ●

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