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Catherine Flinn, **Rebuilding Britain's Blitzed Cities: Hopeful Dreams, Stark Realities**, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, 264pp., £26.09 (paperback)

In an attempt to break the cycle of writings around the perceived failures of postwar British architecture, the architectural historian Adrian Forty suggested two decades ago an alternative approach.[1] Instead of solely focusing on failures construed in material terms, he suggested exploring how the actual users could have experienced, as private citizens, the 'architectural expression[s] of the welfare state' [2]. Catherine Flinn's new book *Rebuilding Britain's Blitzed Cities* on postwar British planning does not engage with question of people's private experience of the newly reconstructed city centres. She does, however, inadvertently follow Forty's advice to look beyond the material object to try to make sense of postwar city centres and re-problematise the narrative that the planners, as Margaret Thatcher so famously claimed, 'cut the heart out of our cities'. At the heart of the book is the question of why 'none of the [ambitious and forward looking] plans was [were] fully implemented' for if, as Flinn argues, 'the rebuilt city centres were indeed failures, we need to look deeper than just appearance to understand why' (p. 1-2). Flinn makes the convincing argument that 'a combination of economic factors, legislative changes and local issues (...) combined to override physical plans in almost every city' (p. 5). She wants us to understand why plans 'rarely translate into reality' and how this was the case in the context of Britain's postwar rebuilding programme. (p.xxi)

Organised in six chapters, Flinn's detailed story about the cities' reconstruction plans in the first decade after the Blitz moves from the general to the specific; from the rhetoric of the drawn plans and dreams to the making and implementation of planning economics and legislation, to end finally in the architecture of reconstruction in Hull, Exeter and Liverpool.

Beyond an introductory chapter 1, Flinn's story kicks off by setting out a framework and context for the birth of postwar city plans in chapter two, focusing on the 'positive' rhetoric of reconstruction, the administrative actions for reconstruction, and the physical reality. It moves on to discuss the economic planning apparatus of reconstruction on the national level in chapter three where we are introduced to the Investment Programmes Committee (IPC), a little known but hugely influential economic planning committee which Flinn uncovered during her extensive archival research. The discovery of this committee allowed Flinn to evidence how capital investments and resource distribution (mostly controlled by the IPC) limited and controlled the rebuilding of cities and as such the execution of the planners' plans and dreams. In other words, it created the dichotomy between dreams and reality Flinn refers to.

It is fair to say that the inclusion of this committee in the postwar planning apparatus is one of the major contributions of the book and shows that close scrutiny of archival documents in both national and local archives can still make important contributions to the postwar planning historiography. It reminds us of the advice the Pulitzer prize winning author Robert Caro received when he began his iconic work on Robert Moses in the 1970s, 'to turn every page' in the archive, and that is also what Flinn seems to have done. Not only did she 'turn every page' but she also brought into dialogue different local and national archives into a fascinating dialogue.

While chapter three outlines the new economic planning infrastructure and constraints, chapter four documents the physical planning process and the making of planning legislation through the Ministry of Town and Country Planning (MTCP) which installed a centralised mechanism to control local plans while it created at the same time a bureaucratic nightmare and complexity to the reconstruction process at the local level. How the debates, decisions and conflicts

between the IPC and MTCP about the economic funds, allocation of materials, plans and building license allocations for reconstruction played out on the local level is further explored in chapters five and six in the cities of Hull, Exeter and Liverpool - arguably the two most interesting and commanding chapters of the book. Furthermore, the focus on three lesser-known cities is refreshing and reflects Flinn's strong emphasis on the local in combination with the national. The two most interesting findings in both the latter chapters are the involvement of the private developers in rebuilding the postwar city, prefiguring as such familiar interpretations of city building under neoliberalism; and, secondly, the 'mundane' architecture of retail, two areas Flinn prepared well for further scrutiny.

Making a contribution to our understanding and knowledge of postwar architecture and planning is laudable at the present time because of the deplorable status of postwar planning and architecture in Britain, as evidenced by the preservation struggle faced by many modern architectural postwar buildings regarded as exemplars of the period. Even though much has been written about postwar architecture and city building in different contexts, Flinn succeeds well in her endeavour to expose the intricacies of the decision-making process in the 1940s and 1950s, an area that has not received a great deal of attention as yet by scholars. This makes her work sit well in amongst other recent writings on the city which reflect what Simon Gunn has dubbed the 'new urban social history' whereby cities and architecture are used as lenses through which to study wider economic and cultural processes.[3] While Gunn specifically refers to recent work about British cities, we can easily see how this newly dubbed strand of scholarship is observable in North America for at least a decade in discussions around urban renewal. [4] Little attempt is made by Flinn herself, however, to contextualise her work in this fascinating emerging scholarship around rebuilding the postwar city in order 'to recover', as the urban historian Samuel Zipp and Michael Carriere argued in relation to urban renewal in the US, 'the way it [planning processes] evolved out of and not simply into conflict'.[5]

While the book makes excellent contributions towards knowledge of specific events and planning processes (however messy and complex these were in reality) and as such is able to explain what one could call 'failed' projects, questions remain at the end of my reading around the larger framework of the book. So much space and time was spent on unfolding the meticulous details to reconstruct planning events that little time was left to place these findings in the intellectual contexts and histories of ideas in planning and architecture.

Indeed, the important question remains open if we can measure success or failure by comparing the realised projects to the advertised dreams in the public realm, a point also made by Matthew Hollow in his attempt to deconstruct the much discussed 'utopia versus reality dichotomy' [6]. A second question raised by Flinn's work is whether contextualising and unearthing processes in themselves is an effective strategy to combat the negative perceptions around postwar planning. When Forty made his call for an investigation of the private experiences of postwar architecture, he also made a general call for an investigation into perception in general, and more specifically, for an inquiry into the minds of those who judge the works.

Some artist curators (like, for example, The Decorators) and architectural historians like David Roberts, to name a few, have taken up Forty's challenge in recent years. [7] What is certain is that *Rebuilding Britain's Blitzed Cities* (and other recent books about postwar planning) will provide a new momentum to re-theorise and interpret postwar planning theories and histories. It might even stimulate a renewed debate into some of the lost powers of the planner-architect in current developments.

Notes

1. Adrian Forty, "Being or Nothingness: Private Experience and Public Architecture in Post-War Britain." *Architectural History* 38 (1995), 25-35.
2. Ibid. 32.
3. James Greenhalgh, "The New Urban Social History? Recent Theses on Urban Development and Governance in Post-War Britain." *Urban History* 47, no. 3 (2020): 535-45.
4. Such as Otto Saumarez Smith, *Boom Cities: Architect-Planners and the Politics of Radical Urban Renewal in 1960s Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019; Guy Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019; Samuel Zipp and Michael Carriere. "Introduction: Thinking through Urban Renewal." *Journal of Urban History* (December 6, 2012 2012).
5. Ibid. 3
6. Matthew Hollow, "Utopian Urges: Visions for Reconstruction in Britain, 1940-1950." *Planning Perspectives* 27, no. 4 (2012): 569-85.
7. David Roberts, "Make Public: Performing Public Housing in Ernő Goldfinger's Balfron Tower" *The Journal of Architecture* 22, no. 1 (2017/01/02 2017): 123-50.

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