wm25 heygate pdf

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The Heygate estate at Elephant and Castle in south London is a striking late example of British local-authority modernism. The development contains 1,212 flats and maisonettes and is dominated by four long, slab-block buildings of an uncompromising north-European austerity. The smaller sister to Peckham's huge Aylesbury estate, it was planned in 1968 and erected by Laing between 1970 and 1974. Both estates emerged from the office of Southwark borough architects, the most ambitious builders of local authority housing in London in the years following the abolition of London County Council in 1965. Posterity has not been kind to either estate. They have been routinely derided and have become bywords for the supposed failure of the modernist social housing project. A slow-moving regeneration of the Elephant and Castle area is in progress and the Heygate estate is currently being readied for demolition.

Although it is a late and fairly degenerate example of postwar modernism, the Heygate estate is, I have come to believe, a kind of built poem, so rich is it in formal and cultural meanings. It is not quite the same as the 'rough poetry' envisaged by the Smithsons in the 1950s, but its very lateness is in its favour. It has achieved a different kind of 'rough' poetic density as a contemporary ruin, a spectacular graveyard of ambition in which the faint, encrypted outlines of transformative aspiration can still be detected.

My Heygate composition applies the idea of encryption to the audio it is built from: almost all of the source sounds are processed beyond recognition. Audio sources include field recordings; recordings made with a very low frequency (VLF) receiver (including the crackle of Rodney Gordon's 1961 stainless steel monument to Michael Faraday on the north roundabout); sounds gathered by contact microphones in lifts in various buildings on the Heygate; and sounds collected with a telephone pick-up coil on the walkways. With this material, I made a discontinuous electronic composition that moves through a series of discrete atmospheres. The use of sounds derived from the same place might seem to offer only a notional unity to the piece, particularly as many of them have been processed into new and unrecognizable shapes. However, I believe that such audio retains within it the fine grain of the source sounds and that it acts as a kind of acoustic translation of the actual ambience of the estate. The relationship between space, sound source and listener persists, in encoded form, in the finished work.

In my choice of audio processing tools I sought to foreground textured sounds that corresponded, to my ears, to the look and feel of the buildings. A conventional soundscape recording of the area might offer a more objectively accurate rendition of the place but, laden with traffic and other generic signatures of urban life, it would not communicate enough of the specificity of the place. My encryption of the data offers a re-imagining of that acoustic experience, a translation of the humdrum into a new soundworld. My composition seeks to draw attention to its own artifice, offering a polemical and situated ear aided by technological prostheses, rather than a blank

audio snapshot with pretensions to objectivity. If some strands of sound art seek to convey a particular experience of place, this piece finds – or loses – itself in displacement. Yet, despite the encoding of the audio data through processing, I aspire to present a very particular 'hearing' of the environment, one that listens to its unrealized potential as much as its actuality.

My aim in this work has been to offer, through the endless plasticity of sound, a sideways glimpse of the otherworldly potential encoded in such architecture. While current building design seems typically to be motivated by a mixture of pragmatism, nostalgia and security-awareness, the postwar years had, in some places and in some situations, different imperatives. So my project is a kind of acoustic archaeology, seeking to detect the transformative meanings buried deep in the compromised vocabulary of late 1960s social housing. If the affect-laden pop songs that float around the shopping centre can still occasionally take us by surprise, then so too can the messages communicated, albeit less directly, by the angular lines and abrasive textures of this fundamentally forward-looking mode of architecture.

Will Montgomery, 2011

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