

# KEEPING UP THE STANDARD

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The 1976 Soviet film *The Irony of Fate, or, Enjoy Your Bath!* directed by Eldar Ryazanov, is predicated on what happens when the serial production of system-built, prefabricated buildings reaches disorienting proportions. A man gets incredibly drunk on New Year's Eve, seeing off friends at an airport. He accidentally gets on a plane, then arrives in a new city, too drunk to realize, where he asks a cab driver to take him to the street he lives on. When he gets out of the cab he goes into an identical apartment block, with an identical door, where his key successfully matches an identical hole, and goes into an identical flat and falls asleep. Hilarity ensues when the attractive female resident spots him asleep on her sofa the next morning. The joke is made at the expense of the extreme standardization the Soviet Union employed to solve its housing crisis in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. The wave of mockery and vituperation that these buildings have since faced has obscured the fact that they housed millions of people in relatively spacious, centrally heated, and sanitary accommodations for the first time in many of their lives. Nevertheless, the critique in the film hits the mark. Once you take into account the different standards applied to a (widely defined) geographical region, there really is often no significant spatial or visual difference between a housing estate—or entire city—along the borders of Finland or by the Pacific Ocean. It wasn't just housing—the Soviet Union developed standard buildings for cinemas, cultural institutions, health centers, supermarkets, and circuses by region, allowing local artists and architects to make small alterations to standard modules only after the shells had been erected.

Like many advances later viewed as negative, this structural standardization began according to a universally praised typology: neoclassical housing, specifically the British terrace. International styles existed—a Roman temple in France could look almost identical to one in Armenia. Yet the British version was the first instance in which standardization also led to publication of pattern books, style guides, and the development of industrialized construction methods. As the United Kingdom became the first country to both industrialize and be more urban than rural, skilled artisans and clerks were housed in interchangeable, regular houses, with plaster-cast classical details on their porches, as de-skilling diminished presence of individual workmanship. In this seriality there is usually no significant difference except the color of the brick between a late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century lower-middle-class district of South London, North London, Salford, Dublin, or Liverpool. This difference is a matter of style rather than construction. Behind the regular facades is frequently a much more chaotic, all-brick architecture of angular bays, sloping roofs, privies, shabby gardens, and later, ad-hoc extensions, leading to the epithet "Queen Anne Fronts and Mary-Ann Backsides". Standardization was an aesthetic, a way of imposing a visual discipline on the competition of speculative builders and owners. And notoriously, construction quality often came in at a distant second.

It's for this reason that high Victorians regularly denounced British neoclassical architecture. Industry and mass production advanced ever

further into everyday life. The long, repeated, identical terraces of Marylebone, Islington, Kennington, or Bloomsbury reflected the interchangeable and soulless environments in which rationality and mechanization proceeded unchecked. Augustus Welby Pugin's *Contrasts* (1841) juxtaposed the apparent variety and individual expression of the medieval city with the cookie-cutter industrial city: its main image is a skyline of church spires against a skyline of prisons and factories, based on Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Despite this and the proliferation of brightly colored, spiky skylined Gothic and Neo-Baroque buildings that defines Victorian city centers, housing became more, not less, standardized. Details—such as the ubiquitous bay window—did become more generous as the nineteenth century wore on. Yet while neoclassicism was based on repetition, later nineteenth-century builders tried to mask this, covering up industrial processes with a surfeit of details borrowed from the Gothic, the Baroque, the Renaissance, and sometimes more obscure sources. It is in reaction to this proliferation that modernist architects embraced mechanization to effect regularity, order, and serenity, resulting in the flat facades and roofs of 1920s Berlin housing estates. In mid twentieth-century Berlin, owners of apartment buildings scraped off the stucco details of late-nineteenth century tenements to make them look more “modern”.

In one of the first books on modernism published in the UK, Bruno Taut's *Modern Architecture* (1930), photographs of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century terraces—often somewhat dilapidated—were reproduced as examples of the local precedent. What neither Taut nor anyone else could have predicted was what would happen to them in the 1970s. Apart from Georgian developments in high-rent areas such as Bloomsbury, by mid-century much of the housing had deteriorated into “slum” housing. One of the more prestigious developments, the grand curves and squares of Notting Hill in West London, was considered a “ghetto” by hostile observers in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. The more mundane stock-brick streets of Islington and Camden, however, were patronized by the middle class who loved them for their regularity, light, and air—ironically qualities that were meant to define the modernism they had rejected. The result, as they spent their money on renovating and restoring these mundane terraced houses, was that the same building could be experienced totally differently depending on which social class comprised its inhabitants. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, this problem soon recurred in modern architecture.

The UK had a difficult, tortured experience with system building—odd given its precedence in the field of industrialization. Glasgow inherited appallingly built, exceptionally elegant neoclassical tenements from its nineteenth-century spell as the “Second City of the British Empire”. The city tried out various standard and non-standard means of building tower blocks and slab blocks in the Gorbals in the 1960s. It found that several standardized estates, using precast factory-made concrete panels clipped together on site, could be built in the time of one architect-designed masterwork. Unsurprisingly, given the scale of the city's housing problems and poor resources, the housing committee went for large-panel concrete construction

systems in a big way. By the late 1970s, it had a density of prefabricated towers rivalled only by east-central Europe, much later to industrialize. The towers were sometimes identical from site to site with small variants—height, patterns on precast balconies, color of concrete panels—but more often, the repetition would be confined to each individual “estate”. London on the other hand favored the repetition of particular types across town. The first standardized estate was Morris Walk, in Charlton, which used the “Larsen-Nielsen” system developed in Denmark for a series of towers and low-rise maisonettes literally clipped together on the production line. Judged a success, identical estates were built elsewhere—cheap, quick, and modern. You couldn't tell one from another, but weren't the Georgian terraces much the same? Wasn't regulation better than chaos?

All this ended when the Ronan Point tower in the East End collapsed after a gas explosion in May 1968. Larsen-Nielsen was meant to go up to eight stories, but Ronan Point and its identical twins on the Freemasons Estate in Canning Town were twenty-two stories each. After this, councils started to demolish blocks that used particular systems. A series of estates in the North of England using a system developed by the Yorkshire Design Group were judged to have been so badly built that every single one of them had been demolished by the 1990s. Corruption scandals overtook Birmingham and Newcastle, as it became clear that the developers of the building systems had successfully bribed many councillors and architects. A de-standardization of the skyline resulted, but oddly, never happened anywhere else. The problems were considered a consequence of peculiar circumstances in the British construction industry. In the “Visegrád” countries, the richer and more developed parts of the Soviet bloc, there is currently a de-standardization program that doesn't involve demolishing housing, as the interchangeable large-panel blocks are insulated with a layer of styrofoam, then painted and plastered with different pastel patterns, as a means to “identify” one block from another which is otherwise exactly the same, at least in terms of its structure.

One of the most important repeated monuments of post-war modern architecture isn't a standardized building, but is by an architect who specifically opposed any concrete panel construction system. I'm referring to two council housing towers in London designed by Erno Goldfinger, trained in Hungary and Paris and based in London since the 1930s. The first of these, Balfron Tower, is a poured concrete Brutalist design consisting of stacked maisonettes, with a clear structural grid and richly textured high-quality concrete. This structure is attached by flying walkways to a separate tower, containing lifts and services. The design is indebted to Louis Kahn's concept of “served” and “servant” parts of a building. Goldfinger moved into Balfron for a few months to ascertain what worked and what didn't, what residents liked and disliked, and applied this to a new commission for a tower in Notting Hill: Trellick Tower. If you squint, they look the same, although Trellick is architecturally the more slender and elegant, and taller. Almost as soon as they were finished, the towers became controversial, despite their

exceptionally high standards of space and materials. Trellick was demonized in the tabloid press as the “tower of terror”, fetishized by punks, and quietly improved by its local tenants’ association, until gradually the local rich—who had already taken over the terraces and squares—spotted how good it was. Private flats in the mainly council-owned block can go for up to a million.

Balfron, on the other hand, marooned in a post-industrial area next to the motorway approaching the Blackwall Tunnel under the Thames, was considered “hard to let” and faced no comparable cult following or partial gentrification. However, the fashionable status of its older sister must have had something to do with what happened next. The estate’s residents were balloted on a change of ownership from the local authority to a charitable housing association. Told that only the latter would be able to renovate the block, residents voted in favor of the new ownership. Soon after, the housing association decided it would be too expensive to renovate the building for those that actually lived in it. Their solution was two-pronged: first, as flats became vacant, they were temporarily leased to “creatives”—artists, mainly—who raised the tone of the building, put on events, and created a scene that attracted attention from those who wouldn’t usually visit, soon realizing it was Trellick Tower’s twin; then the creatives too were cleared out, the building renovated, and sold on the open market for a *lot* of money. Other buildings in other cities—Anniesland Court in Glasgow, even the Genex Tower in Belgrade—that have a similar design to Balfron and Trellick are now regularly compared to these icons of social architecture successfully monetized; perhaps they can expect a similar fate. The lesson seems to be that seriality, done well enough and limited to just few enough copies, can be exceptionally lucrative.