

Megalithic Modernism and a Modern Megalith



For this year's 'Glasgow International Festival of Art' the artist Jeremy Deller constructed an inflatable life-size replica of Stonehenge, Britain's most famous stone circle, and called it 'Sacrilege'. People were invited to come and bounce around irreverently on this witty sculpture as a new way of interacting with this mysterious icon of ancient British history.

But if you climb the hill behind Glasgow's Sighthill housing estate you will come across another stone circle, standing between the tower blocks, the motorway and an incinerator. This is a site of astronomical interest (as the name Sighthill implies, it offers a clear view of the sky), the stones laid out there demarcate the rise and fall of the moon and it is reputed to be a place where ancient pagan rituals took place.

The children on the estate have come to believe that this stone circle is haunted and they fear its ancient magic. And yet, what people seem quick to forget is that this stone circle, like Deller's, is a modern construction. It's interesting how quickly a structure can become haunted, it just has to evoke loss, the sense that it is the vestigial remains of something that was there and is not any more. Ancient as it appears, this circle was actually built as part of the estate in the 1970s. Headed by a local science fiction writer and amateur astronomer, Duncan Lunan, the original plan for the project was to build a replica of Stonehenge out of modern materials. But in the end they opted for a very traditional circle, whose stones show the line of the midsummer

sunset. It seems apt that this endeavour was the brainchild of a science fiction writer, it captures the spirit of post-war utopianism, and of a shining vision of a technological future that was actually an ahistorical and fantasy much like Scotland's fictional nostalgia for its pre-historical pagan past.

Billed as 'the first authentically aligned stone circle to be built in Scotland in 3000 years' it was commissioned by the Glasgow Parks Department using funds from the government's Jobs Creation Scheme. But when Margaret Thatcher came into power in 1979 she abolished this employment scheme and the project was halted before the last stones could be laid. The remaining four stones were stashed in a bush where they have

remained ever since. By the beginning of the 80s this stone circle had become a ruin before it could even be finished. This unintentional ruin became a parable for the fate of the housing estate as a whole and a testament to both the failure of the modernist vision for 'urban renewal' and the bitter legacy of Thatcherism in Scotland.

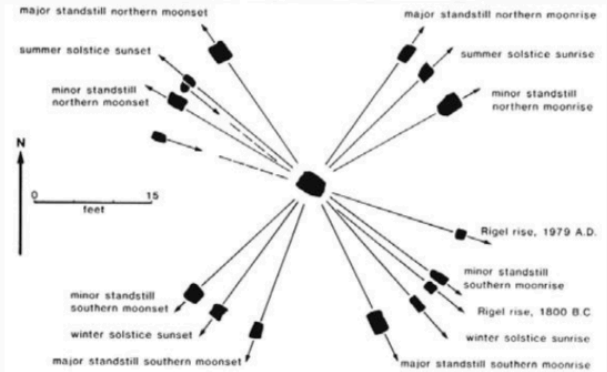
Thatcher's decade (she was prime minister from 1979-90), with the widespread factory closures and controversial taxes inflicted on Scotland, was a rough time for Glasgow and this was particularly reflected in the decline of estates like Sighthill. In the decades preceding this the British government built 1.3 million new homes and the highest proportion of this new-form social

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housing was erected in Glasgow. Many of these housing schemes have since fallen into ruin and are earmarked for demolition. The Sighthill estate is one of the largest, consisting principally of ten 20-storey slab tower blocks. Constructed between 1964-69, high-rise living was already on the brink of going out of fashion, and elsewhere estates like this were already failing after only one generation. What had been intended as shining beacons of a glossy future were rapidly consigned to a vision of ruination and despair. As unemployment bit hard at the beginning of the 80s, the community living on the estate went into progressive decline. The estate went from being state-of-the-art living to socially stigmatized slums. Families moved out and addicts, asylum seekers and ex-convicts took up some of the flats, many remained empty.

'Work as if you were in the early days of a better nation.' This is a phrase often quoted by eccentric Scottish artist Alasdair Gray,

madcap chronicler of the nation's psyche, and now inscribed on the walls of the Scottish parliament building. This statement seems particularly poignant for



the city of Glasgow. It is a city of workers, and still identifies as such despite its industrial decline. The quote recalls both the romanticised power of an imaginary pre-historic nation, when men still believed in their monoliths; but, also, the seventies when this stone circle was being built, before decay and despondency of the Thatcher-era set in. The monolithic tower blocks, many of which now stand empty, loom

around this stone circle with their gaping glassless windows and seem to echo its aesthetic on a gargantuan scale; both broken monuments to an extant vision.

Glasgow is now setting about exorcising it's

the 7,500 residents of Sighthill. Despite the city's new plans for the area Duncan Lunan is still on a quest to have the circle completed, there is an organisation for this 'Friends of Sighthill Stone Circle' - of which, appropriately, Alasdair Gray is patron. But perhaps the circle is best left as it is, for in its ruined state, it seems they inadvertently created something much more powerful; it will enter the local mythology, for whom it stands as a ghostly memorial for the vanquished estate and a past-future that never came to pass.

Olympics is another potent example of an ancient ritual reincarnated for our times, and in its modern manifestation it promises a 'legacy' of urban renewal very similar to that which was originally promised to

the 7,500 residents of Sighthill.

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