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Place-Making Theory behind Claremont Court

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Abstract— This paper aims to elaborate the architectural theory on place-making that supported Claremont Court housing scheme (Edinburgh, United Kingdom). Claremont Court (1959-62) is a post-war mixed development housing scheme designed by Basil Spence, which included ‘*place-making*’ as one of its founding principles. Although some stylistic readings of the housing scheme have been published, the theory on place-making that allegedly ruled the design has yet to be clarified. Architecture allows us to mark or make a place within space in order to dwell. Under the framework of contemporary philosophical theories of place, this paper aims to explore the relationship between place and dwelling through a cross-disciplinary reading of Claremont Court, with a view to develop an architectural theory on place-making. Since dwelling represents the way we are immersed in our world in an existential manner, this theme is not just relevant for architecture but also for philosophy and social sciences.

The research in this work is interpretive-historic in nature. It examines documentary evidence of the original architectural design, together with relevant literature in sociology, history and architecture, through the lens of theories of place. First, the paper explores how the dwelling types originally included in Claremont Court supported ideas of dwelling or meanings of home. Then, it traces shared space and social ties in order to study the symbolic boundaries that allow the creation of a collective identity or sense of belonging. Finally, the relation between the housing scheme and the supporting theory is identified.

The findings of this research reveal Scottish architect Basil Spence’s exploration of the meaning of home, as he changed his approach to mass housing while acting as President of the Royal Incorporation of British Architects (1958-60). When the British Government was engaged in various ambitious building programmes he sought to drive architecture to a wider socio-political debate as president of the RIBA, hence moving towards a more ambitious and innovative socio-architectural approach. Rather than trying to address the ‘*genius loci*’ with an architectural proposition, as has been stated, the research shows that the place-making theory behind the housing scheme was supported by notions of community based on shared space and dispositions. The design of the housing scheme was steered by a desire to foster social relations and collective identities, rather than by the idea of keeping the spirit of place (*genius loci*).

This paper presents Claremont Court as a signifier of Basil Spence’s attempt to address the post-war political debate on housing in United Kingdom. They highlight the architect’s theoretical agenda and challenge current purely stylistic readings of Claremont Court as they fail to acknowledge its social relevance.

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I. CONTEXT

IMMEDIATELY after the end of the Second World War, a very intense debate started in Great Britain characterized by a common determination to build a ‘better tomorrow’, based on the idea that the spirit of experimentation and innovation necessary to winning the war had to find application in post-war reconstruction [1]. This became the subject of huge number of articles, pamphlets, movies and exhibitions calling for a government-led reconstruction plan [2], able to allocate resources evenly and set up an effective social agenda. **New housing provision and how standard of families’ lives could be improved were issues of urgent concern in relation to the enhancement of the architectural and urban principles underpinning design and construction** [3] of their homes became urgent. This is why a number of groups like the Housing Centre and the Women’s Advisory Housing Council pressed for the Minister of Health to take on the coordination of the new housing drive. Research developed by the Modern Movement about the housing and the improvement of living spaces from an architectural perspective found fertile ground in Britain, although these principles did not gain mass approval before the war. In particular, the guidelines for better ‘living’ conditions collected in the Athens Charter (1933) in relation to best sites for housing development, minimum amount of solar exposure and – in general - hygienic issues in dwelling units [4] became the starting point for further reflections.

The **Scottish response to the housing drive was radically different** in its approach and outputs from what happened in England and Wales because of the different housing forms involved. In Scottish towns and cities the standard housing form was the tenement rather than the terrace, as a response to the Scottish feudal system of land ownership where higher density building upwards brought a better financial return to landowners [5]. The post-war Labour Party in Scotland were concerned about rising rents in the city, and landlords profiting from housing shortages. Their **strong anti-tenement tradition (underpinned by a belief in Garden city principles) viewed this structure as an unacceptable remnant of an industrial past which had to be cleared away** and be replaced by clean, healthy, new, municipally owned housing [6]. This was seen by policy-makers and designers as an opportunity to affirm the *Scotland’s national identity* [7]. This ethos encouraged Modernist architects to test out new spatial layouts and architectural languages, despite the fact that the economic depression in Scotland affected the development and spread of the Modernist principles more than

in the south [8]. The housing programme became the ideal testing ground for the shared confidence in technological progress and rationality in building design [9] and as a way to achieve an improved level of social life. Moreover, it is important to highlight that the output of the housing programme in Scotland in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s were largely led by public institutions to an extent far above that of any other developed country at that time [10], with nearly 80 per cent of developments publicly built and owned.

During the post-war period there was developing awareness in the need for home improvement policy which would complement and aid the massive housing building drive [11]. **This was accompanied by a strong desire to retain the character of Scottish towns and cities**, which was developed in the interwar years. During this period, a generation of architects and planners, supported by central government in the form of grants, attempted to provide integrated and comprehensive renewal, whilst retaining the fabric and the *character* of historic places [12]. Some authors recall **Basil Spence's role as a pioneer of site-specific architecture** [13]. His well-publicised regeneration work in Dunbar, served as springboard to a succession of 'conservative surgery' style projects for Edinburgh Corporation. The doctrine of restrained modern intervention in the historic fabric, or 'conservative surgery' had been advocated for over half a century in the Edinburgh Old Town by Patrick Geddes and his successors. This approach was driven both by the sanitary drive to open up green spaces in congested 'slums' and by the Arts and Crafts philosophy of *place-sensitive* and material sensitive picturesque [14]. However, **in 1956 when Spence was commissioned to design a housing scheme in Newhaven, Edinburgh, his style shifted towards Modernism** [15].

Some authors have noted eclecticism in Spence's work [16], while others maintain that there is an underlying uniformity in his use of materials, texture, rhythm and colour [17]. These authors agree that his change of approach to mass housing was influenced by his appointment as President of the Royal Institute of British Architects (1958-60). As President of the RIBA he dramatically improved the public profile of architects [18] and worked passionately to drive architecture to the wider socio-political debate, and, in particular, to sustain the *role of the architect in an era of developer-led architecture* [19]. During this period, in 1959, Spence was commissioned by Edinburgh council to design Claremont Court, including *place-making* [20] as one of its founding principles. This paper contends that **Spence's intellectual position towards place was shaped by the post-war social issues that demanded new meanings of home and thus, challenges Glendinning's material reading of the Claremont Court scheme as a response to the existing character of place or *genius loci*.**

II. DISCUSSION

A. Claremont Court

Provision of higher quality low income housing in

Edinburgh took a number of different forms; including the expansion of new areas and the redevelopment of the inner city [21]. The overall effect was a massive outward expansion yet with new infill developments and high levels of continued inner-city living. As noticed by Glendinning, in terms of location the national housing drive in Scotland was polarized in two complimentary elements:

1. The building of *new, low-density settlements in the suburbs of existing towns or in new towns*;
2. The *redevelopment and intensification of existing inner-urban sites*, in response to the primary need to clear the so-called 'slums' [22].

The site allocated by Edinburgh Housing Corporation at the end of the 1950s for Claremont Court, as shown in Fig. 1, was located on the edge of the New Town in East Claremont Street, along one of the axis leading from Edinburgh town centre to Leith, which was previously occupied by a biscuit factory, which is present in historical maps until the 1950s.

Claremont Court housing scheme was designed and built between 1959 and 1962 and comprised of 63 dwellings, in an urban composition of low-rise rectangular volumes grouped in L-shapes blocks around two landscape courtyards, built out of colour-washed bricks and characterised by the typically modern horizontal banded windows.

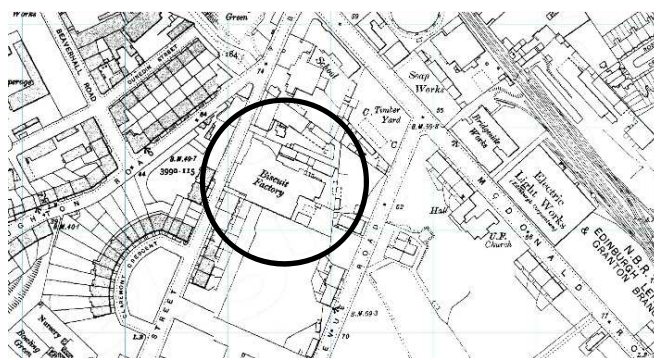


Fig. 1 Map showing Claremont Court site in Edinburgh in 1900.

[Town Plans 1:500 1st Edition [TIFF geospatial data], Scale 1:500, Tile: edin-0200304011-1. Updated: 30 November 2010, Historic, Using: EDINA Historic Digimap Service, <<http://digimap.edina.ac.uk>>, Downloaded: 2016-07-05 15:14:06.15 © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2016). All rights reserved].

Glendinning suggested that Spence's architectural approach to Claremont Court could be seen as a **reflection of the *genius loci*** [23], and as an **attempt to give continuity to the urban façade along East Claremont Street** in order to create a sense of correspondence with the residential buildings around (Fig. 2). This analysis supports the observation that Spence held a life-long concern that buildings should sit appropriately within their contexts [24]. However, it is important to remember that post-war industrial decline brought dramatic changes in Edinburgh's housing. Up to this point, the main form of housing had been the tenement. During the 1960s and 70s much of the population living in overcrowded and rundown tenements were either moved to new estates on the periphery of Edinburgh, or to new high-rise buildings being erected in their place in Leith [25], the former working-class

industrial area to the north. A small minority were rehoused in low-rise social housing schemes such as Claremont Court. At the same time, the 1950s were a lean time for architects as the country faced economic hardship [26]. During the post-war period, every building had to be granted a license by the Ministry of Works which kept tight control over scarce building materials. Paint was an inexpensive way to cheer up the environment when construction materials were extremely scarce and the use of natural materials, such as facing brick and stone, was restricted to priority projects at the expense of relatively modest housing and church projects [27]. The lively colours which were used on small elements such as the doors and the balconies at Claremont Court were in part, a small reaction to the drabness and austerity of the period, a way of endorsing the optimism of the post-war years defined by an *'upbeat, forward looking zeitgeist'* [28]. The desire to move forward from the devastation across Europe was reflected in textile design, furniture and architecture: Spence's work has been noted to celebrate the pleasures of peace and evoke a *'glittering modern future'* [29]. Claremont Court was not only inspired by the aesthetics of continental Modernism, but also its architectural strategy appears to adhere to the Modernist philosophy of solving social problems through a new design approach [30]. **This paper claims therefore that a progressive and place-specific social agenda was purposefully integrated with the architectural image of the building and its spatial layout.**

In the 1950s, living in flats was widely seen, for the first time, by many architects and design thinkers as the appropriate solution, for all social classes, as a response to the spread of the suburbs that *"had left many British people in a state of shock in the 30s"* [31]. In addition to this, an important circumstance which contributed to the radical change of mentality across the country was during the war period when the construction materials crisis worsened and the use of prefabricated construction elements to be used in social buildings spread widely. Even though traditionalism was still a dominant force, the shift towards more Modern ideas took place and was applied to housing layouts. began and produced the first outputs. In their report of the listed buildings of Scotland, The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland refer to Mies van der Rohe's Weißenhofsiedlung development in Stuttgart in order to underline the relevance of Claremont Court within a broader architectural discourse.



Fig. 2 Relation between Claremont Court block1, East Claremont Street and the residential buildings along it.

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B. Dwelling units: new meanings of home

Although Spence's housing development attempted to give hints of continuity to the urban façade of existing tenements in East Claremont Street, the new housing was radically different. Up to the post-war period, the main housing type was the tenement which was typically made up of *'three-or-four storey buildings featuring a communal stairwell, with two or more flats on each landing, communal toilets and each unit consisting of one or two rooms'* [32]. There were numerous problems with tenements, including: overcrowding, small facilities and lack of sanitary facilities. Improvements on tenements had to be collective rather than individual, which produced administrative difficulties. Also, social attitudes towards the tenement itself and the wider political attitudes towards tenement ownership and landlordism were highly critical [33].

Under the pressure to increase housing production in the 1960-70s, including subsidies for multi-storey blocks and a shift away from traditional construction methods, the architect-led compromise between old and new in housing design became more difficult [34]. Instead, new estates were built; it was hoped that they would provide healthy housing, with light, air and space. The 1960s were a heyday of utopian thinking on housing, underpinned by the prevailing view that planners could make and shape society [35]. In the years after the Second World War, attaining a *home of one's own* was a *'cross-class dream'* for an ever-growing number of people [36]. **Privacy, self-containment and modern home devices (mod-cons) were central aspects of the imagined home**, as evidenced by the Mass-Observation survey in 1943. Demographic trends, rising affluence and availability of goods for consumption shaped the meanings of home in post-war Britain [37] towards an aspiration for domestic privacy. Even within crowded working-class housing, there was an attempt to achieve some kind of privacy within everyday life. However, in the 1950s and 1960s, neither having modern appliances, nor privacy of a home for married couples were universal experiences.

When Basil Spence was appointed to design and build the 63-units development at Claremont Court, the combination of a wide range of dwelling units and the provision of communal

areas were key concerns. According to the original drawings available at the Historic Environment Scotland Archive, it is possible to identify *three main types* (A, E, H), and *some typological variations starting from types A and E* (C, D, J, K, G) located either at the crossing points between two blocks (C, D, J) and at the end of the fourth block (K, G) (Fig. 3). The three main types correspond to:

- **Flats (type A)**: arranged in the piloti-raised two- and three-storey blocks running north-south. The authors consider relevant to highlight the presence of two smaller flats (**type B**), located in the ground floor of the two north-south blocks. Type A flats have two bedrooms, facing either East Claremont Street (when in block 1) and the first courtyard (when in block 3), whereas type B smaller flats have one bedroom. All front rooms of the flats in Block 1 and Block 3 are east facing, with a view to the quiet and more intimate landscape courtyards;

- **Maisonettes (type E)**: located in the two four storey blocks running east-west. The *maisonettes* have two bedrooms on the upper floor, one north facing, overlooking the narrow road (leading from the main street to the car park), the other, with a larger window and a small balcony, oriented to south and facing the landscape courtyard. In this type, the striped windows and the large balconies of the front rooms are south facing, with a view either to the first (Block 2) or to the second courtyard (Block 4);

- **Cottages (type H)**: arranged in two separate blocks running east-west. Referring to the archival materials, it is relevant to notice that this type was clearly designed for the elderly. These single-storey one-bedroom houses are the only ones provided with a south-facing private garden area at the rear.

Although the various dwelling types were aimed at different household sizes, they were all consistently designed as self-contained flats with a bathroom, kitchen and separate living room. At the time, having a bathroom was still a major social dividing line [38]. The kitchen sink had the only water tap available in the tenement, which meant that the kitchen was used for washing food, dishes, clothes, and even oneself. The *front room* (incorporating the cooker), was *'the centre of home and family life'* [39]. The spatial separation between food production from food consumption in the *front room* [40] moved away from the working-class practices in the tenements, where both took place in the same room. As a trend towards more home-centred patterns of consumption and leisure in the postwar years occurred, the need for different family members to have their own space increased. In the postwar home *'work and leisure, as well as education and entertainment, intersected'* [41]. Although Claremont Court has been described as the most *'severe'* of Spence's Edinburgh housing developments from this period [42], the attempt to address the widely-expressed desire for a different type of home life should not be overlooked. Previously described as a *'civilized'* example of social housing [43] combining *"practicality and modernity through the provision of basement stores, drying areas to the roof space and in-built*

storage to properties" [44], **the design of Claremont Court acknowledged the cross-class desire of domestic privacy and domestic forms of leisure**, alongside the emergence of home-making as a marker of identity.

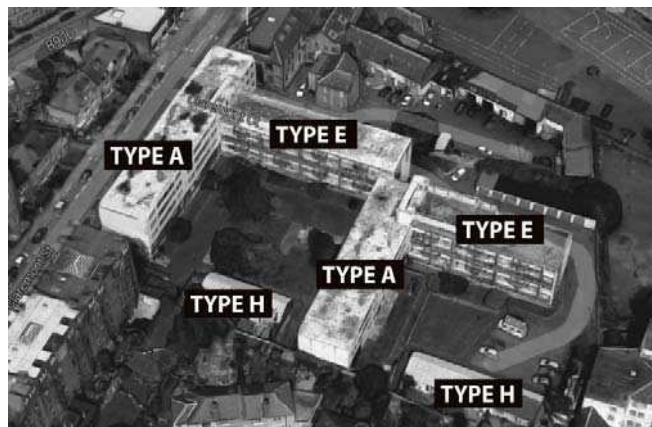


Fig. 3 Claremont Court. Main types (A, E, H) distribution across the 6 housing blocks.

C. Shared spaces: notion of community

Although much smaller in scale and in an inner-city location, Claremont Court holds similarities to other post-war estates which Spence built in suburban sites, which were *'mildly Modernist reworking of the Garden City tradition'* (e.g Sunbury Urban Districts near London (1947) and Beechwood Avenue (1947-52) and two in southern Scotland, Bannerfield in Selkirk and Summerfield in Dunbar (1945)). Glendinning describes how they were structured around the principles of fostering *'community'* through planning of self-contained *'neighbourhoods'*, spaciouly laid out to maximise sunlight and open air, with low-rise blocks of cottages and flats, often in parallel rows or around cul-de-sacs [45].

Seen as a response to the *"utopian concern to foster 'community' through planning in self-contained neighbourhoods"* [46], the development is laid out with the six blocks facing the two internal courtyards, closing up on East Claremont Street, with a clear division between cars and pedestrian access providing mobility within the site and enclosed communal spaces (Fig. 4). Thus, Claremont Court dwellings were provided with open space, sunlight and integrated social facilities, building on the Modernist concept of *'planned communities'* [47]. In accordance with the CIAM guidelines and consistently with his public campaign as RIBA president, **Spence tried to translate into architectural language the ideal of designing houses 'for all' [48], raising the living standard of the masses but also providing inclusive communities.** This is supported by the fact that Claremont Court includes one-bedroom dwelling units, offering a *home of own's own* to new family types (married couples with no children or single people, including the increasing proportion of working women).

Just before the design of Claremont Court began, Young and Willmott's [49] influential assessment of post-war housing estates had criticized their alienating loss of community and social solidarity. Spence's *place-making*

strategy could be seen as a response to the growing negative view of the estates of the 1930s and 1950s as less social than other housing forms. In the tenements, a sense of community was created through casual encounters in the stairs, drying green and shared facilities.



Fig. 4 Claremont Court. Landscape courtyard between blocks 1 (flats), 2 (maisonettes) and 5 (cottages) © Nadia Bertolino (2016).

Four main design actions can be identified in Claremont Court through which Spence aimed to foster as sense of community and facilitate social interaction:

- *Typological variety*, suggesting that the units should be allocated to different users and family groups;
- *Vertical and horizontal distribution across the different blocks*, with attention to the design of stairwells (mainly at the junctions across different blocks) and walkways to facilitate the social interaction;
- *Units internal distribution*, to allow all the balconies (and in particular those next to the living room) to face the courtyards and eventually facilitate neighbors interactions (Fig. 5);
- *Provision of communal areas* such as the two landscape courtyards and the drying area on the roof of blocks 2 and 4.



Fig. 5 Claremont Court. Block 3 and block 4 balconies facing the landscape courtyard. © Nadia Bertolino (2016).

Spence claimed to have acknowledged certain aspects of the collective life in the old tenement – albeit in a radically transformed way for a different meaning of home.

In the late 1950s Basil Spence's architecture shifted towards

Modernism. The change in direction was clear from a stylistic point of view; however, evidence shows that he didn't endorse Modernism's emphasis on *space*. This is supported by Spence's concern that buildings should sit appropriately within their context. Thus, Claremont Court's concept of *place*-making has been understood as a regionalized approach to Modernism [50], with an emphasis on *place*. Glendinning's observation that Claremont Court can be understood as a reflection of the *genius loci* seems based on a material reading of the development, which this paper challenges. The architectural theory of *genius loci* [51] brings back the emphasis on *place* to architecture, thus offering a departure from Modernism's emphasis on *space*. However, it is underpinned by an essentialist understanding of *place*, and the legacy of Heideggerian thinking. The response to the *genius loci* is, therefore, the response to the inherent character or qualities of *place*. **This paper contends that Spence's place-making strategy was based on a progressive reading of place as something socially-constructed and evolving; while Claremont Court addressed the cross-class desire of domestic privacy and domestic forms of leisure, it offered a departure from the dominant dwelling types.**

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Historic Environment Scotland archive
Claremont Court Residents Association

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