

Building Brazilification

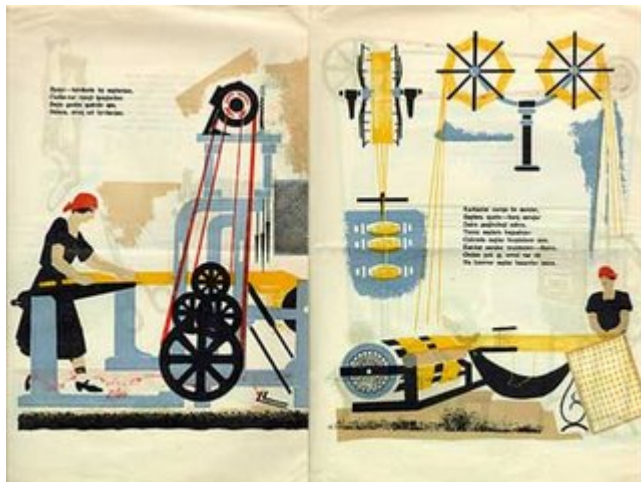
Owen Hatherley



The Glorious First Five Year Plan was not necessarily an example of Sustainable Development, but if you're going to go from Feudalism to Outer Space in 30 years, those kind of considerations go out of the window. As does any concern for human life, but we'll leave that for the moment. During the early stages of said plan, a children's book was published entitled *Let's Build*, in which sandcastles become the microcosm of a victorious socialist construction. A typical verse: 'curly topped Igor/laid out his ditches/his fences, bushes and factory'. So in the period of Market Stalinism, with its targets, absolutist rhetoric and mass surveillance, it's apt to see another book of the same title pop up.



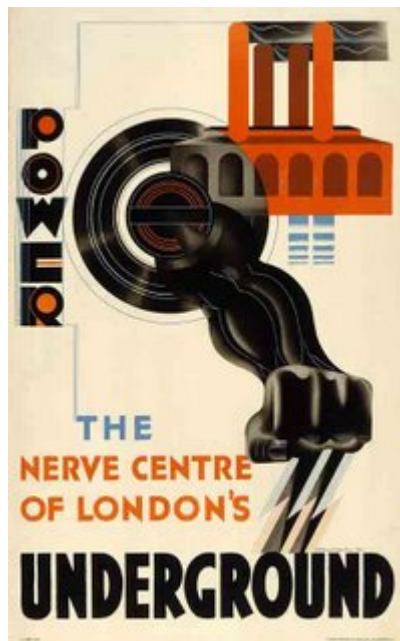
James Heartfield's *Let's Build!* (a very Stalinist exclamation mark that, as in *Stakhanovites - let's Speed up the Mass Production of Pig-Iron!*) is the sort of thing to warm the cockles of J.G Ballard's heart. Recognising that 'today there is no London as such', it advocates building 5 million new homes in the next ten years, irrespective of the green belt, and mainly in the conurbation of the south east, creating a massive subtopian city spreading from Cambridge to Southampton which with impressive perversity is cited as a fulfilment of Marx and Engels' advocating, in the *German Ideology* and the *Manifesto*, of 'abolition of the distinction between town and country'. Ballard was an entertainingly brackish contributor to a recent and (as ever) insufferably smug *Time Out* on the issue of 'Disappearing London', where his familiar positions were trotted out- build flyovers, abolish speed cameras, tear down the 19th century clerks' terraces changing hands for preposterous sums, and rebuild the whole thing as an enormous exurb in the style of Michael Manser's Heathrow Hilton. As this sort of thing is usually taken as the product of a dystopian imagination, it's a bit of a shock to see it advocated seriously; particularly given Heartfield's prose, which gives the impression sometimes of Marinetti writing *Financial Times* editorials.



There is a great deal that is pertinent in his demolition of ruralism, and more pointedly in the dismissal of the much-vaunted 'urban renaissance', which is rightly seen as a process of gentrification, forcing out of the working class from urban centres, inadvertently helped along by the psychogeography of Iain Sinclair or lesser lights like Peter Ackroyd, which adds character, subcultural cachet and accordingly an extra grand or two onto long-obsolete Victorian housing. The 'creative industries' alleged regeneration is a mere dressing up of inertia and heritage obsession via arts centres and showpieces that have no benefit for the people that actually live in the areas in question (the Baltic, the Tate Modern, 'Cities of Culture'), merely diverting from the issues of ridiculously expensive housing. So far, so good.



The book is a product of the website and 'campaigning company' **audacity**, one of the many outgrowths from the Trotskyist/Libertarian/Contrarian LM-Living Marxism-Revolutionary Communist Party axis. And in an age of determined obscurantism it's actually rather exciting to read of people planning mile-high towers, super-cities, and reviving the 'technology is the answer, so what is the question' rhetoric of mid-century technological visionaries like Cedric Price and Buckminster Fuller. Bracing, even – 'can we have the White Heat of Technology back, please?' If there is a future for Modernism, it's there, rather than in dewy eyed reminiscences of Goldfinger and Lubetkin. Where their stick-bending comes unstuck though is in a general political conformism, acquiescence with the Market Stalinist line that there is no alternative to laissez faire.

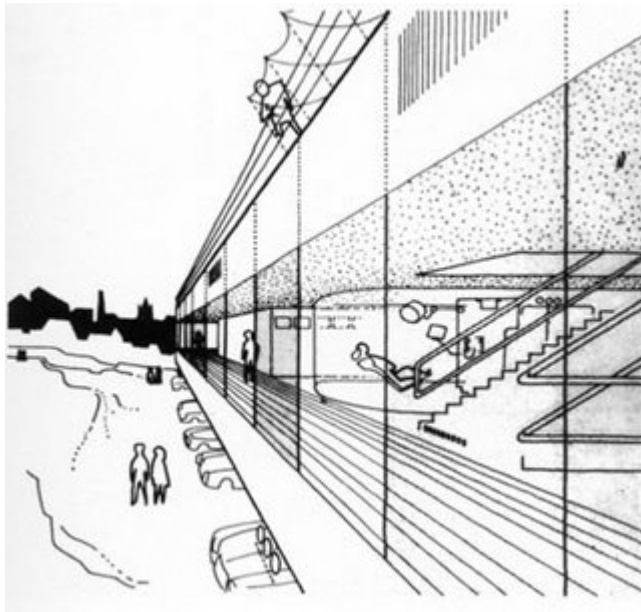


So, although Heartfield is well aware that these 5 million homes are not in line with current political 'realism', Let's Build exhibits a correspondent Capitalist Realism, that if only we tore up the planning regulations and let the developers do what they wanted, then demand would be satisfied, all will be well and the disappearance of the exorbitant phantom housing market won't crash the economy, no sir. And let's have no doubt about the ethics of owner-occupancy – it's what people want, after all. There's a potted history of anti-suburban rhetoric, citing the jeremiads of everyone from Clough Williams-Ellis (of Portmeirion/*Prisoner* fame), HG Wells, Iain Sinclair and Jonathan Glancey. This is mainly entertaining stuff- he relishes the irony of the beautifully desolate [Greenwich Millennium Village](#) being designed to provide the maximum opportunity for 'communities' to develop, points out the suburban parentage of all manner of swaggering urbanists, and makes a fair case for suburbia. The problem is that, in writing off determinism, he falls into a pat libertarianism, seemingly welcoming the onrush of the Non-Place, the indeterminate zones that mark out true subtopia: Bluewater, the M25 and Barrett Homes, stamping on a human face forever. The fetish for the urban and edgy he mocks derives in part from *nostalgie de la bue*, but equally from the fact that the dispersed, low-density city-not-city he proselytises tends to make it's cleverer, more ambitious, less conformist or simply bored inhabitants want to get out to the city as soon as possible. As Jonathan Raban pointed out 30 years ago contra Lewis Mumford, Harlow is no nearer to the New Jerusalem than Hackney: and neither, chances are, will be the Thames Gateway, it's very name proclaiming its status as Non-Place, a gateway being somewhere you pass through to get somewhere else.

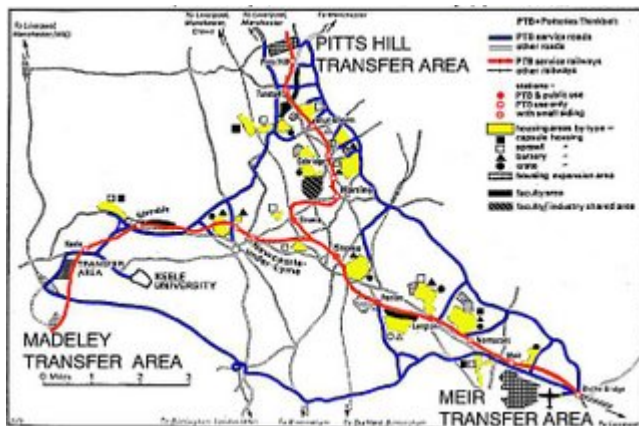


It's worth setting Let's Build! against Glancey's *London: Bread and Circuses* (Verso, 2002). In the latter the hero is interwar London Underground head [Frank Pick](#), who in a radio debate with a Tory fulminating against the horror of suburbanisation, expressed the view that these processes had already been set in motion, and the thing to do was make it as humane, functional and beautiful as possible. The Underground has often maintained this since, from

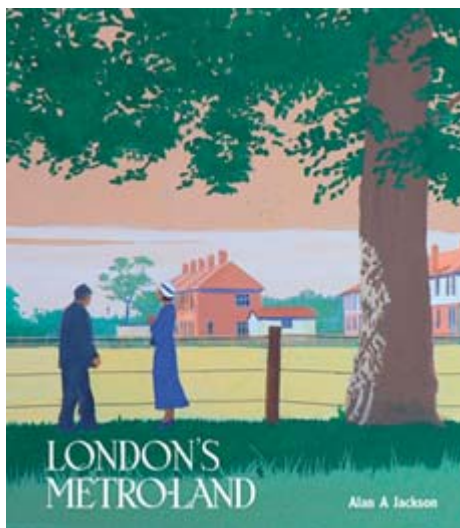
Charles Holden's serenely Trans-European stations out in Metroland, to the tremendous neo-Constructivist Jubilee Line extension- perhaps the only architectural achievement to be proud of built in London in the last 10 years. Suburbia was often a by-product of Metroland, not the other way round: infrastructure first, then the people to use it. Accordingly, Glancey makes approving references to all manner of sprawling modernist developments as long as they've had some thought put into them, whether at the Barbican or Thamesmead.



One figure you could imagine Heartfield and Glancey agreeing on is Cedric Price, socialist and technological futurist, whose 1960s proposal for the 'Potteries Thinkbelt' is the obverse of the 'leave it to the developers' argument. Over the disused industry of Staffordshire, old railways and canals as well as new public transport links would create a mobile technological centre, pioneering scientific knowledge through a bricolage of the existing infrastructure and the utopian technologies of high Modernism. The form of Price's proposals would be copied; most notably in the Centre Pompidou, but the radicalism of his proposals for development have been all but ignored.



By contrast, in true Ballardian style, in *Let's Build!* development in itself is a virtue. So more motorways, more shopping centres, more business parks, and more tweedy new homes that right down to their tiles and yellow brick pray that the 1890s never end (just before their inhabitants plug in their iMacs anyway). This is the shyness of the lapsed Marxist to advocate such 'statist' measures as sorting out and expanding Britain's appalling rail network, getting freight off the motorways where Thatcher dumped it and back on the railways, and recognising that the car economy is doomed. This is worth doing not only because the car is, once we take anti-environmentalist posturing out of the equation, an incredibly pernicious force, crawling 4 miles an hour up London streets, melting ice caps, causing massive rises in asthma and killing thousands. With touching mock-Marxism, *Let's Build!* seems to suggest a better private transport technology will 'inevitably' come about.



The progressive destruction of public space since Thatcher gets nary a mention. There's also little thought as to what this new supercity will actually look like. Will Alsop's proposals are cited, and then dismissed as developers won't want to pay for architects. So for all the jibes at heritage London, the new city would almost certainly resemble a vast, dispersed third-rate copy of London itself, without any of the original's contrasts and frictions. 'Reduced versions of the homes of 50 or 100 years ago' as he quotes Patrick Keiller. Admittedly, Audacity has been involved in attempts to revive Modernist system-building, though seeing as the consumer is king, the choice between neo-Georgian or Japanese Metabolist is likely to be a fairly foregone conclusion. And naturally, as we're letting the market wend its own merry way, we should ignore the fact that in Northern cities housing is actually being demolished and build the Thames Gateway supercity, as to acknowledge that this was fundamentally absurd would be more 'determinism' – likewise to utilise the huge quantity of unused land sat on by the aristocracy. There's a streak of Southern triumphalism here that rankles, stopping just short of suggesting the North just decamp to the supercity away from the morbid, self-pitying and unfashionably Old Labour 'hinterland': we're far from the Potteries Thinkbelt here. Stuart Cosgrove is approvingly cited, describing the support for Socialists in Scotland as mere sentimentality.



For all that, the central plank of this is sound enough. Reading *Let's Build!* on a bus going past the Pepys Estate in Deptford you could see a glimpse of what is actually happening in London without new mass housing outside the city, as well as the degeneration of its public housing in microcosm. The estate, laid out in the late 60s, consisted originally of three huge, shinily clad point blocks, surrounded by jaggedly expressionist brick blocks enclosing a Victorian school, a colonnaded Georgian street and plenty of open space, while a bridge linked it with Deptford Park on the other side of Evelyn Street. The familiar story ensued: Lewisham Council botched it, and the lifts in the skyscraping point blocks were notoriously prone to failure. In the last few years, as this outpost of 'Docklands' was redeveloped, first one of the point blocks was bought by a private developer (whether the lifts are a problem for the new inhabitants is worth investigating) the space was filled in by tweedy mock-cottages and some pallid replicas of the lower-rise blocks, and the bridge to the park was demolished. At the other end some more 1800s revivalist housing was built, partly for those all-important key workers, just in case anyone thought they were just out to make a quick buck. Nearby roads loop aimlessly around a shopping centre, ringed by more revivalist new housing, so that it's actually quicker to walk from the Pepys Estate to Bermondsey tube. What is actually happening in somewhere like the Pepys Estate, as the desperately poor share an adjacent tower block to the desperately rich, isn't gentrification, it's [Brazilification](#).



Of course, any Left-wing programme worth its salt is going to include a programme for mass building, and accordingly there's some quotation of some venerable Socialist figures here (Eric Heffer!). What seems most pertinent is a citation from William Morris, advocating skyscrapers and low

density cities spiralling out into the countryside, in response to the Victorian social reformers who refused to factor class and capital into their equations- the 'workhouse socialists'. The point, as Morris had it, was revolution, not ameliorative reform. *Let's Build!* doesn't even advocate reform. Instead the gap between city and country is to be closed by the benevolent hand of capital. Rather than eliminate Little England, this would spread it over a massive scale, and with that obliterate the historical gaps, the juxtapositions, the accidents and holes- the city's 'in-between places' that Malcolm McLaren mourns in *Time Out*- as the gap between the very rich (if massively indebted) and very poor becomes ever more yawning. That is, the things that make life in this oversized, overpriced mess of a megalopolis, whether you define it as ending at Epping or Cambridge, almost bearable.