Recently a local kid glued up our gate lock. I chased him into the housing estate that he lived in, only to be rounded on by his parents who accused me of everything from paedophilia upwards. The hoodies on this estate have especial disdain for cyclists, so on occasions we have been bombed with bags of water thrown down from the sixth floor access balconies as we shoot down the hill. The local police describe the estate as a no-go-zone. This social demise is reflected in the physical decay of the 1960s buildings; as neglected as their tenants, the blocks are now scheduled for demolition less than forty years after they were put up. A fresh start needs to be made, and new blocks are now being erected around the old ones, and in a complex logistical operation the tenants are gradually being decanted from old to new. Same hoodies, same glue lockers, same water bombers, but new apartments, as if the fresh white spaces will at a stroke cleanse the social ills, as if the architecture will suddenly redeem the tenants, maybe even make them happy. It is at the moment that the old is crashing down, as the new buildings emerge from the piles of rubble, that this equation (fresh architecture = fresh hope) feels so fragile.

What this moment of equilibrium (of old balancing against the new) evokes most clearly is a sense of hopelessness - that this is just an instant in an inevitable cycle of renewal and decay, social *and* physical, in which the relationship between architecture and happiness is less enduring and certain than the fresh moment of the new might suggest. This short essay explores exactly that gap between the hope and the reality – the hope attached to isolated new architectural beginnings, and the reality of being placed within a much more complex continuum.

FALSE OPTIMISM

Daniel Libeskind, famous for his angular 'iconic' buildings such as the Jewish Museum in Berlin and Imperial War Museum in Salford, always reminds us that architects are inherently optimistic. Where a photographer might depict grief, a poet evoke sadness, a novelist describe anguish, it would be a strange architect indeed who deliberately set out to inflict misery on the world, or who designed a project that purposely made the world a worse place. Architects attach to their projects the hope that they will transform lives for the better. In the most insistent versions of joining hope to stuff, it is implied that architecture is not just a necessary condition for happiness but a sufficient one, as if architecture alone provides conditions for betterment. It is as if we actually believe Le Corbusier's pronouncement that: "there does exist this thing called architecture …a product of happy peoples and a thing which in itself produces happy peoples. The happy towns are those that have an architecture."[1] It is that 'in itself' that is so telling about Corbusier's polemic on the heroic potential of architecture– and it must be a polemic because it takes only a glance out of any window to understand that the hope of a direct, instrumental, link between architecture and good mood is specious. Of course architecture contributes to mood, both good and bad, but it is part of a much wider set of social and personal forces, most of which are beyond the direct control of the architect. It is exactly this lack of control that makes the architect feel so uncomfortable, and to escape this uncertainty the tendency is to invest all one's hope in things that one can control – proportions, tectonics, materials, form - hence the refinement and polishing of architecture as a set of purified objects that presume to escape dependency on those other forces. For this reason, as Libeskind's recent work – more angular and visually excessive than ever - shows only too clearly, architectural optimism is all attached to a

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1 Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press, 1946), 19.

reading of architecture as aesthetic and symbol, and the more 'radical' the nature of the aesthetic or form, the higher the implied level of optimism that something new is happening.

HOPELESS BEAUTY

The prime architectural means of delivery of this happiness is that of beauty. The association of beauty with happiness is one of those platitudes that have been passed unthinkingly from one architectural generation to another. By the time that the baton reaches the writer, Alain de Botton, the association is stretched to breaking point as he struggles to sustain such a simple, simplistic, idea over the length of his book *Architecture and Happiness*. But at least de Botton's approach is benign enough in its replacement of architectural ego with a gentle rumination on nice spaces that make one feel good. More worrying is when the association of beauty to happiness is asserted as an inviolate truth. Thus the modernist architect Walter Gropius writes: "in a long life I have become increasingly aware of the fact that the creation and love of beauty not only enrich man with a great measure of happiness but also bring forth ethical powers."[2] Beauty, and beauty alone, here has the miraculous power to redeem, providing happiness at a personal level and ethical behaviour at a collective level.

Gropius is far from alone among architects, ancient and modern, in making the claim that aesthetics and ethics are mutually dependent; that a good aesthetic, in the form of beauty, leads directly to a good life, in the form of an ethical society, and equally that an ethical society is the necessary context for the context of good aesthetics. This closed loop is very consoling for architects, because it places them - as arbiters and purveyors of aesthetics - as central figures in the ethical process and in the production of happiness. Architects here enter into a comfort zone in which they believe that they are doing good by doing what they do best, namely making beautiful things. The founding of architectural optimism on the *beauty=happiness* equation makes absolute sense within this comfort zone, but a with a closer inspection, that

simple association begins to unravel. Most poignant of all is the great sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's argument that "the greatest crimes *against* humanity (and *by* humanity) have been perpetrated in the name of the rule of reason, of better order, of greater happiness."[3] It is under the guise of the promise of happiness that the more ruthless aspects of modernity are tolerated. Beauty and happiness are here not benign qualities best appreciated by the bourgeois aesthete and comfortable intellectual of de Botton's pages, but are the cover for the insistent execution of power and control. "Beauty, alongside happiness, has been one of the most exciting promises and guiding ideals of the restless modern spirit," writes Bauman.[4] Beauty and happiness are bound to the notion that conditions – architectural and societal – can be transformed into perfected states through the exercise of control and expertise. Beauty – as exemplified in the aesthetic catchwords of order, harmony and proportion – is the handmaiden of the much wider project of modernity – the execution of order, social norms and reason, a project that Bauman has so brilliantly shown is hardly one of benign objectivity.[5]

MAXIMUM HAPPINESS

Architecture thus becomes one of the most powerful mechanisms in the delivery of the *promise* of happiness on which modernity is founded. Modernity offers the continual assurance of something better; progress is the headlong rush towards that promise. Beyond moments of intimacy and love, modern happiness lies neither in the present, nor in de Botton's wistful reminiscences of the past, but in the expectation of an unknown but hope-fully improved future. This is why Bauman argues that: "happiness was bound to remain a postulate and an expectation: its

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2 Walter Gropius, *Apollo in the Democracy: The Cultural Obligation of the Architect* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 36.

3 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 238.

4 Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 113.

5 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), and still more chillingly, Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

fulfilment a promise always some distance ahead of reality."[6] So if architecture, as object, is to represent the promise, it can only do so in distinction from the reality of the delivery of happiness. The great modernist projects, with all their utopian drivers, could only ever stand for a better future, they could never actually provide it in full.

The clients for Park Hill in Sheffield, one of the greatest of all those projects, appeared to understand that architecture alone could not bring forth happiness, even though that appears to have been an aspiration for the project. Park Hill, planned in the 1950s, was the icon a hopeful future, clearing people from slums and placing them in better environment, streets in the sky. In a fascinating report written to the Chairman and members of the Sheffield Housing Management Committee, the author notes:

"Although every effort is made to settle applicants in the house and area of their choice it is clearly impossible to secure *maximum happiness* of everybody and there is established evidence from psychiatrists that it is not so much the defects and de-merits of the building but it is the inherent tensions of the tenant that lead to dissatisfaction in the small number of intractable cases. With this in mind the survey shows that Park Hill is a satisfactory "machine for living in" to use Le Corbusier's phrase."[7]

That architecture can only be a 'satisfactory' deliverer of happiness is perhaps a more realistic appraisal of its potential, but even this more modest aspiration can only be achieved if architects shift their attention from static objects to the dynamics of social space. As noted above, architectural optimism is mistakenly attached to buildings as things to be refined and perfected in their form and technique. It is an optimism founded on belief in the power of beauty. However, this optimism is misplaced, because the contemplation of the object beautiful is only found in a state of removal away from the flux of everyday space. Happiness found at a distance is

short-lived, an evanescent cloud of escape that is blown away by the first winds of reality. Not only this, but any attempts at complete ordering and control in architecture are bound to fail, as all those things that are suppressed in the depiction of 'timeless' beauty come back to haunt the ideal. Time, users, waste, the unexpected event, dirt, chaos – all these and many more may be banished to the periphery of the artificial stage that a new building erects, but all are waiting in the wings to rush on when the photographer has left. And, of course, in all their social dynamism these things dismissed as mere contingencies overwhelm the static perfection, a mere sandcastle in the face of the waves. And in this, these conditions are revealed not as the contingencies of architecture but its very necessities. Time and users in particular are forces that architecture's optimism must deal with. How often does one have to quote Henri Lefebvre's "(social) space is a (social) product" to remind architects and their clients that buildings do not 'produce' aesthetic space, but are settings for social space?[8]

GROUNDED HOPE

Architecture's offering lies exactly here- in its contribution to the formation of social relations. Buildings affect and effect social relations in the most profound ways, from the very personal (in a phenomenological engagement with stuff, space, light, materials) to the very political (in the way that the dynamics of power are played out in space) - or, to take on the feminist maxim ("the personal is the political") buildings conjoin personal space and political space. In recognition of the role that architecture plays in part of (and it really is only part of) the production of that social space, architects need to face up to the responsibility of affecting the social dynamics of others. This is not about the delivery of happiness, that is too fragile and volatile a term, but about the hope that those social relations might be that much better. To argue that there is not a direct, causal, link between beauty and happiness, or at a wider level between aesthetics and ethics, is not to argue for the dismissal of the role of aesthetics and tectonics, but to more realistically understand the role they

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6 Zygmunt Bauman, *Society Under Siege* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 140. Chapter 4 of this book traces the 'history' of happiness from Seneca to the present day.
7 I am indebted to the Swedish artist Annika Eriksson for showing me this extract (the emphasis is mine). Annika's brilliant performance/video on Park Hill, entitled Maximum Happiness, was shown at the Sheffield Art 08 exhibition.

8 HHenri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 21.

play in the context of the much wider set of social dynamics to which architecture contributes. This effectively relieves the pressure on the design of the perfected object beautiful, and of its reception as the be-all and end-all of architectural culture. By all means craft the building, compose the elevation, worry over the detail, but at the same time see these as just some tasks in service to another. The key social, and thus ethical, responsibility of the architect lies not in the refinement of the building as static visual commodity, but as a contributor to the creation of empowering spatial, and hence social, relationships in the name of others.

The original philosopher of happiness, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, should have the final say in the matter of architecture and happiness. "Believe me," he says, "that was a happy age before the days of architects."[9] His gripe is not with architects per se, but with architectural knowledge as a form of detached wisdom, which aims at the "great and exalted." In the place of this aloof intellect, Seneca champions the "nimble and keen" mind "whose gaze is on the ground."[10] The suggestion is that if happiness or, in my construction, hope, is to be found through architecture, a different kind of thinking is required: one full of ingenuity, eyes and feet to the ground rather than raised up with pretensions of detached greatness. Otherwise we will be perpetually guilty as charged by Seneca: "that was a happy age before the days of architects."

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9 Lucius Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1917), 399. Seneca's dialogue on happiness is De Vita Beata ('On Happy Life').
10 Ibid.