



VORSPRUNG //

the regeneration game

PROPERTY DEVELOPERS
URBAN SPLASH TAKE
ICONIC BUILDINGS THAT
HAVE FALLEN INTO
NEGLECT AND TRANSFORM
THEM FOR THE 21ST
CENTURY. WE MEET THE
COMPANY'S FOUNDERS
AT THE SITE OF THEIR
GREATEST CHALLENGE TO
DATE - SHEFFIELD'S PARK
HILL ESTATE (PICTURED)

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It looms. Brooding over the wintry Sheffield skyline, positioned imposingly on the crest of a hill, stands the largest, and perhaps most controversial, listed building in Europe. Depending on your point of view, the Park Hill estate, a sprawling snake of low-rise social housing opened in 1961, is either a striking statement of utopian, post-war optimism or a brutalist concrete monstrosity. It's the kind of building that can't be ignored, that forces you to form an opinion. You either love it or you hate it.

Standing on the top floor, looking out over the city centre with Tom Bloxham and Jonathan Falkingham, founders of Urban Splash, one of the UK's most successful and innovative property developers, it's clear that they absolutely love it.

'We will leave this city, not less, but greater than it was left to us,' declares Bloxham. It's a rough translation of part of an oath taken by the young men of Athens thousands of years ago, declaring their commitment to civic duty. 'Those of us who are privileged enough to leave something behind that will outlive us have a huge responsibility to leave a good legacy.'

Some would question the value of the legacy left by Park Hill's architects and concentrate on its status as a renowned sink estate. But Tom and Jonathan wax lyrical about the building's strengths and its aesthetic. Corbusian staircases. Free flow of space. 'So much of modern building has no vision,' Tom bemoans. 'The architects of Park Hill had a vision of a place that would make people happier, with running water, light and modern conveniences. Now architecture seems to be more about maximising square footage and minimising costs. We'd rather create a beautiful space and make an impression.'

Since 1993, the pair have been making their mark all over the UK. Taking on projects that others would consider to be problems – empty factories, dock buildings, tower blocks, even whole streets. Urban Splash has a reputation for transforming such places into imaginatively designed, and highly desirable, living and office spaces.

We are standing in the first phase of the building's redevelopment, a concrete skeleton, painstakingly stripped out by hand using lump hammers and wheelbarrows. Listening to the pair talk, it's easy to get a sense of how this framework will be given new life.

'People always say sink estates will never be nice places to live. With Park Hill, we want to turn one of the worst places to live into the most desirable place to live,' Tom says. It's hard to imagine now, but there was a time when a flat in one of these blocks was a dream home. Around 2000 people were rehoused from slums into one of more than 900 duplexes, where every front door opened onto a walkway wide enough to drive a milk float along – they were called 'streets in the sky'.

'There's a beauty to the brutal concrete structure,' says Jonathan. 'It was a revolutionary building for its time, and aspirational. But people's aspirations change, so we want to make it into something new.'

The dirty brickwork panelling is being replaced with non-fading anodized glass panels and large windows. The finished building will be bright, light and colourful, while retaining its modernist structure.

FROM SINK ESTATE TO SLICK ESTATE //



THE PARK HILL ESTATE WAS GROUNDBREAKING WHEN IT WAS CONSTRUCTED, AND ITS RENOVATION SHOULD PROVE TO BE JUST AS SEMINAL. Park Hill is one of only nine listed post-war public housing schemes in England, putting it in the top seven per cent of the most important buildings in the country.

Although it was built on hills, its roofline remains constant, whether there are four floors or 13 below it. It took four years to construct, and opened in 1961. It was designed by architects Ivor Smith and Jack Lynn as Britain's first slum

clearance housing project. The old streets were recreated as 'streets in the sky', retaining their old street names and sense of place. Repairs to the concrete have to be perfectly colour-matched, and lines where the original pieces were cast in floorboard-sized strips have been added back in. The original coloured brickwork will be replaced with yellow, orange and red anodized panels. When completed there will be 974 apartments (some for sale and some as social housing), office space and a shopping area.



TOP: Jonathan Falkingham and Tom Bloxham, Urban Splash's founders
ABOVE AND RIGHT: The building is being renovated in phases, with people still resident in the old parts



TOP: Tom and Jonathan discuss progress on Park Hill with site staff. MIDDLE: colourful anodized panels replace faded brickwork
BOTTOM: Park Hill is renowned for its ‘Streets in the Sky’ – wide enough for a milk float

‘There are lots of companies that create buildings,’ says Tom. ‘But our driving force is to create great buildings. Of course we want to be successful, but I hope we never build a bad, or even a mediocre, building.’ Urban Splash’s current back catalogue doesn’t show any signs of mediocrity. A no-compromise attitude to good design has made the company responsible for some of the most iconic redevelopments of the past decade. Like Fort Dunlop in Birmingham, once an abandoned Grade II listed factory, now an award-winning retail park, hotel and offices. Or the Midland Hotel, a landmark piece of Art Deco architecture on the seafront in Morecambe.

Their mix of entrepreneurial spirit and ambitious creativity is a winning combination. As Jonathan explains: ‘When we first partnered I had lots of ideas of what could be possible with some of the great buildings in the city. He [Tom] had fantastic business sense, and together I think we tempered each other’s excesses.’

‘Our approach has always been the same regardless of the style of architecture,’ he continues. ‘We try to preserve what is good about a building, but do something new to tackle a building’s imperfections.’ There’s no trace of pastiche in any of their projects, and the balance between old and new is what makes Urban Splash’s developments striking while remaining true to the building’s original character. ‘We don’t have a template, like other property developers. When we take on a project, it’s the building itself that inspires us.’

‘I always ask myself, would I like to live or work here?’ says Tom. ‘If I can’t say yes then I won’t do it.’ So whether it’s a Victorian mill or terrace, an Edwardian factory, Art Deco hotel, or 1960s tower block – no style or period is off-limits. ‘There are only two types of architecture,’ he declares. ‘Good and bad.’

Which brings us back to Park Hill. ‘People often look at buildings like this and think because of bad maintenance they’re not worth saving. But I’d put Park Hill in the same category as great buildings like the Barbican, or even the Tower of London. They’re the buildings that give a place its character and make it distinctive,’ says Tom. ‘I don’t want to live in a place that has the same high street, the same shops, the same office blocks and filling stations as everywhere else. Architecture is what makes a town or city special, and where you are lucky enough to have interesting buildings you should preserve them.’

It looms, unavoidably large, on the Sheffield skyline. But where you may see bare bones, boarded-up windows and concrete under grey skies, a transformation is taking place, an example of how, with a little bit of imagination, beauty can be found even in the most unexpected of places. urbansplash.co.uk



BUILDING ON THE PAST: URBAN SPLASH PROJECTS //



CHIMNEY POT PARK

In many towns across the north-west of England you’ll find abandoned streets of Victorian Coronation Street-style terraces. At Chimney Pot Park in Salford, Urban Splash has brought this style of house right up to date, keeping the shape, size and frontage but turning the interior literally upside down – the living space and kitchens have been moved to the upper floor, and the bedrooms are downstairs. Balconies and roof terraces complete the transformation.



FORT DUNLOP

An empty shell near Junction 5 of the M6, used for nothing more than large advertising hoardings, the old Dunlop factory was a listed building, and one of Birmingham’s most famous landmarks, but had sat unused for 20 years. Urban Splash retained the shell of the building, but cut a hole through it to create a large atrium. A green roof was added, and a hotel built onto the end. Redeveloped as Fort Dunlop, it has become the largest speculative office building outside of London.



3TOWERS

Take three ugly 1960s tower blocks in Manchester, renovate them with a bit of imagination and you end up with the stunning 3Towers development. The towers, which are named after Manchester’s famous Pankhurst family – Emmeline, Sylvia and Christabel – have been transformed into almost 200 new one- and two-bedroom apartments. Grey panels have been replaced with wooden cladding and floor-to-ceiling windows, giving some great views across the city.



MIDLAND HOTEL

First commissioned by LMS Railways in 1932, the Midland Hotel is a jewel of Art Deco architecture on Morecambe’s promenade. With the decline of the town, the hotel fell into neglect, but in June 2008 it reopened after an Urban Splash makeover. The lobby and staircases have been restored, and the old shared bathrooms replaced with modern en-suite facilities. The success of the project was confirmed when it won the RIBA Crown Conservation Award in October 2009.