



Once there were roundabouts

Ian Waites

In May 1964, when I was three years old, my family moved into a two-bedroom council house on the brand-new Middlefield Lane council estate, in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. At that time, we were told that we were not just moving onto a housing estate, we were becoming part of a new ‘neighbourhood’ that was made up of ‘amenities’: a precinct of shops for Mum to get the groceries and a daily newspaper for Dad, a community centre for the O.A.P.s to play dominoes, and playgrounds for the children.

The atmosphere of post-war, modernist, municipal benevolence on this new estate was so strong that it also had its own communal television aerial, which would allow the residents to relax in front of the Telly without having to splash out on having their own aerial fitted. I remember the communal aerial as a tall steel mast that soared some sixty feet up into the air, adorned with a tangled mess of H and X-shaped TV aerials in a time when the 405-lines were still alive. The aerial was situated within a small triangular compound alongside an electricity sub-station that used to hum quietly to itself all day. The compound was naturally fenced off and as a child, it always seemed that the fence was growing up with me: no matter how much I shot up in height, the fence always remained too high to climb over.

The communal aerial transmitted my first eye-popping taste of the corporate modernist spy-world of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* I used to stand at the compound gate and look at its big padlock, imagining that the back of it could slide away to reveal a secret keypad. I’d pretend to punch in a five-digit number and stand by as both the gate and sub-station door simultaneously clicked open. I’d walk through the door, and straight into a secret lift that took me underground into the Lincolnshire HQ of U.N.C.L.E. At the reception desk I’d pick up my identity badge—No.6 for Napoleon Solo of course—and my imaginary pen, into which I would solemnly utter the magic phrase: “Open Channel D”.

The estate had two playgrounds. One was adjacent to the sub-station compound and just across the road from my house so I played there almost on a daily basis from 1964 up until the early 1970s, when my attentions moved towards girls and oscillators. There was never any provision within post-war housing and planning legislation that dealt specifically with the need to give



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“This sandy bit here”, he said, standing on a patch of waste ground, “was the door into the fish and chip shop... that big empty square was a post office. The postbox is still there, but no post office.”—A resident on the Buttershaw Council Estate, Bradford. *The Guardian, Society*, 30 August 2000.

children full opportunities for play, and a 1971 study of British council housing schemes built between 1965 and 1969 showed that out of 39 estates intended for families, only 8 made any provision for play at all, so I guess my friends and I were very lucky in respect of the Middlefield Lane estate.

In recent years however—in these post-Right To Buy, deregulated and residu-
alised days of ‘social housing’—all these amenities have been disappearing, one by one, from the estate. The shops were demolished in 2005 and, soon after, the community centre closed and, with a sharp dose of contemporary reality, became a local office for NACRO (the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders). The communal aerial had long gone by then, taken down in the mid-1980s when the 405-lines were lost to a new world of Squarials and individualism, but a ghostly trace of where the mast used to be remains in the form of a rough circular target of fresh and ever-dying grass.

And, in 2012, I went back to the estate to photograph my playground only to find that it had all gone. The slide, the swings and the roundabout had all been removed, leaving behind a set of modern yet suddenly ancient earthworks: concentric circles of grass, concrete and disintegrating synthetic playsurfacing. Once there were roundabouts, and children who were given the chance to play in a changed society that valued social democracy, progress and community. But now all we are left with are archaeological traces of a future that was never quite allowed to come off, and which only I seem to notice. These earthworks act like conduits in space and time, carrying me back to my childhood, and to this estate as it was in its hey-day.



Ian Waites' research interests centre on landscape, sense of place and memory. Currently, he is researching the history of a post-WW2 council estate where he grew up, examining the original design and planning of the estate in relation to the more phenomenological concerns of spatiality, sense of place and everyday life. The research is particularly defined by his childhood and teenage memories of the estate during the 1960s and 70s, in an attempt to regain a sense of what it 'felt like' to live there—instancesofachangedsociety.blogspot.co.uk